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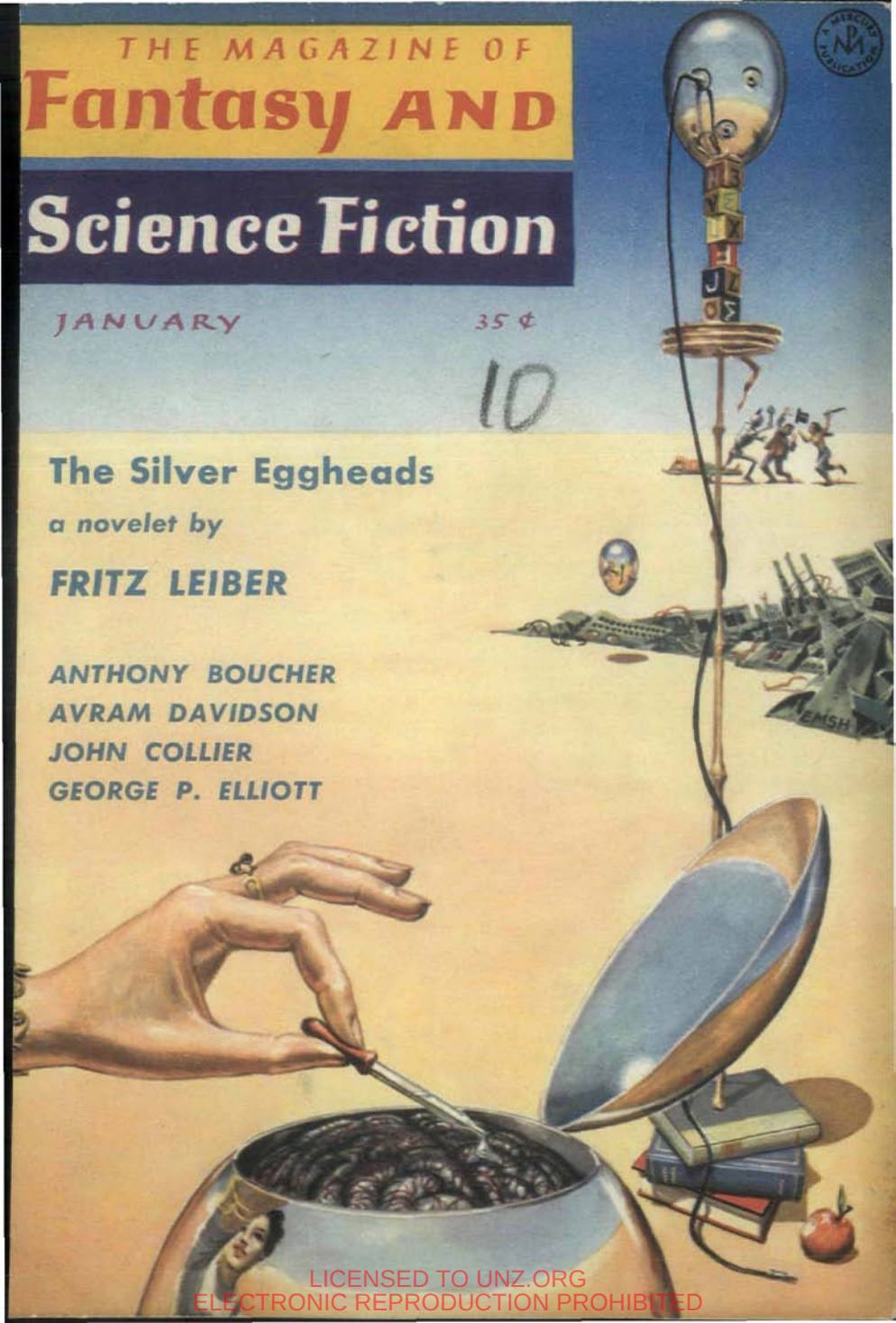
The Silver Eggheads

a novelet by

FRITZ LEIBER

ANTHONY BOUCHER
AVRAM DAVIDSON
JOHN COLLIER
GEORGE P. ELLIOTT



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THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy and Science Fiction

VOLUME 16, No. 1 JANUARY

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Cover by Emsh, illustrating "The Silver Eggheads"

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The Quest for Saint Aquin *is one of Anthony Boucher's two favorites among his own stories (the other is* Nine-Finger Jack) *... We offer it here in the belief that its single previous appearance, in an anthology some years ago, did not give it as wide a readership as it deserves—and in the belief that it is one of the best of all robot stories, eminently worth both reading and rereading. ...*

The Quest For Saint Aquin

by Anthony Boucher

THE BISHOP OF ROME, THE HEAD of the Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, the Vicar of Christ on Earth—in short, the Pope—brushed a cockroach from the filth-encrusted wooden table, took another sip of the raw red wine, and resumed his discourse.

"In some respects, Thomas," he smiled, "we are stronger now than when we flourished in the liberty and exaltation for which we still pray after Mass. We know, as they knew in the Catacombs, that those who are of our flock are indeed truly of it; that they belong to Holy Mother the Church because they believe in the brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God—not because they can further their political aspirations, their social ambitions, their business contacts."

"'Not of the will of flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God . . .'" Thomas quoted softly from St. John.

The Pope nodded. "We are, in a way, born again in Christ; but there are still too few of us—too few even if we include those other handfuls who are not of our faith, but still acknowledge God through the teachings of Luther or Lao-tse, Gautama Buddha or Joseph Smith. Too many men still go to their deaths hearing no gospel preached to them but the cynical self-worship of the Technarchy. And that is why, Thomas, you must go forth on your quest."

"But Your Holiness," Thomas protested, "if God's word and God's love will not convert them, what can saints and miracles do?"

"I seem to recall," murmured

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the Pope, "that God's own Son once made a similar protest. But human nature, however illogical it may seem, is part of His design, and we must cater to it. If signs and wonders can lead souls to God, then by all means let us find the signs and wonders. And what can be better for the purpose than this legendary Aquin? Come now, Thomas; be not too scrupulously exact in copying the doubts of your namesake, but prepare for your journey."

The Pope lifted the skin that covered the doorway and passed into the next room, with Thomas frowning at his heels. It was past legal hours and the main room of the tavern was empty. The swarthy innkeeper roused from his doze to drop to his knees and kiss the ring on the hand which the Pope extended to him. He rose crossing himself and at the same time glancing furtively about as though a Loyalty Checker might have seen him. Silently he indicated another door in the back, and the two priests passed through.

Toward the west the surf purred in an oddly gentle way at the edges of the fishing village. Toward the south the stars were sharp and bright; toward the north they dimmed a little in the persistent radiation of what had once been San Francisco.

"Your steed is here," the Pope said, with something like laughter in his voice.

"Steed?"

"We may be as poor and as persecuted as the primitive church, but we can occasionally gain greater advantages from our tyrants. I have secured for you a robass—gift of a leading Technarch who, like Nicodemus, does good by stealth—a secret convert, and converted indeed by that very Aquin whom you seek."

It looked harmlessly like a woodpile sheltered against possible rain. Thomas pulled off the skins and contemplated the sleek functional lines of the robass. Smiling, he stowed his minimal gear into its panniers and climbed into the foam saddle. The starlight was bright enough so that he could check the necessary coordinates on his map and feed the data into the electronic controls.

Meanwhile there was a murmur of Latin in the still night air, and the Pope's hand moved over Thomas in the immemorial symbol. Then he extended that hand, first for the kiss on the ring, and then again for the handclasp of a man to a friend he may never see again.

Thomas looked back once more as the robass moved off. The Pope was wisely removing his ring and slipping it into the hollow heel of his shoe.

Thomas looked hastily up at the sky. On that altar at least the

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candles still burnt openly to the glory of God.

Thomas had never ridden a robass before, but he was inclined, within their patent limitations, to trust the works of the Technarchy. After several miles had proved that the coordinates were duly registered, he put up the foam backrest, said his evening office (from memory; the possession of a breviary meant the death sentence), and went to sleep.

They were skirting the devastated area to the east of the Bay when he awoke. The foam seat and back had given him his best sleep in years; and it was with difficulty that he smothered an envy of the Technarchs and their creature comforts.

He said his morning office, breakfasted lightly, and took his first opportunity to inspect the robass in full light. He admired the fast-plodding, articulated legs, so necessary since roads had degenerated to, at best, trails in all save metropolitan areas; the side wheels that could be lowered into action if surface conditions permitted; and above all the smooth black mound that housed the electronic brain—the brain that stored commands and data concerning ultimate objectives and made its own decisions on how to fulfill those commands in view of those data; the brain that made this thing neither a beast, like the ass his Saviour had ridden, nor a machine, like the jeep of his many-times-great-grandfather, but a robot . . . a robass.

"Well," said a voice, "what do you think of the ride."

Thomas looked about him. The area on this fringe of desolation was as devoid of people as it was of vegetation.

"Well," the voice repeated unemotionally. "Are not priests taught to answer when spoken to politely."

There was no querying inflection to the question. No inflection at all—each syllable was at the same dead level. It sounded strange, mechani . . .

Thomas stared at the black mound of brain. "Are you talking to me?" he asked the robass.

"Ha ha," the voice said in lieu of laughter. "Surprised, are you not."

"Somewhat," Thomas confessed. "I thought the only robots who could talk were in library information service and such."

"I am a new model. Designed-to - provide - conversation - to-entertain - the - way - worn - traveler," the robass said slurring the words together as though that phrase of promotional copy was released all at once by one of his simplest binary synapses.

"Well," said Thomas simply. "One keeps learning new marvels."

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"I am no marvel. I am a very simple robot. You do not know much about robots do you."

"I will admit that I have never studied the subject closely. I'll confess to being a little shocked at the whole robotic concept. It seems almost as though man were arrogating to himself the powers of—" Thomas stopped abruptly.

"Do not fear," the voice droned on. "You may speak freely. All data concerning your vocation and mission have been fed into me. That was necessary otherwise I might inadvertently betray you."

Thomas smiled. "You know," he said, "this might be rather pleasant—having one other being that one can talk to without fear of betrayal, aside from one's confessor."

"Being," the robass repeated. "Are you not in danger of lapsing into heretical thoughts."

"To be sure, it *is* a little difficult to know how to think of you—one who can talk and think but has no soul."

"Are you sure of that."

"Of course I— Do you mind very much," Thomas asked, "if we stop talking for a little while? I should like to meditate and adjust myself to the situation."

"I do not mind. I never mind. I only obey. Which is to say that I *do* mind. This is very confusing language which has been fed into me."

"If we are together long," said Thomas, "I shall try teaching you Latin. I think you might like that better. And now let me meditate."

The robass was automatically veering further east to escape the permanent source of radiation which had been the first cyclotron. Thomas fingered his coat. The combination of ten small buttons and one large made for a peculiar fashion; but it was much safer than carrying a rosary, and fortunately the Loyalty Checkers had not yet realized the fashion's functional purpose.

The Glorious Mysteries seemed appropriate to the possible glorious outcome of his venture; but his meditations were unable to stay fixedly on the Mysteries. As he murmured his *Aves* he was thinking:

If the prophet Balaam conversed with his ass, surely, I may converse with my robass. Balaam has always puzzled me. He was not an Israelite; he was a man of Moab, which worshiped Baal and was warring against Israel; and yet he was a prophet of the Lord. He blessed the Israelites when he was commanded to curse them; and for his reward he was slain by the Israelites when they triumphed over Moab. The whole story has no shape, no moral; it is as though it was there to say that there are portions of the Divine Plan which we will never understand . . .

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He was nodding in the foam seat when the robass halted abruptly, rapidly adjusting itself to exterior data not previously fed into its calculations. Thomas blinked up to see a giant of a man glaring down at him.

"Inhabited area a mile ahead," the man barked. "If you're going there, show your access pass. If you ain't, steer off the road and stay off."

Thomas noted that they were indeed on what might roughly be called a road, and that the robass had lowered its side wheels and retracted its legs. "We—" he began, then changed it to "I'm not going there. Just on toward the mountains. We—I'll steer around."

The giant grunted and was about to turn when a voice shouted from the crude shelter at the roadside. "Hey Joe! Remember about robasses!"

Joe turned back. "Yeah, tha's right. Been a rumor about some robass got into the hands of Christians." He spat on the dusty road. "Guess I better see an ownership certificate."

To his other doubts Thomas now added certain uncharitable suspicions as to the motives of the Pope's anonymous Nicodemus, who had not provided him with any such certificate. But he made a pretense of searching for it, first touching his right hand to his forehead as if in thought, then fumbling low on his chest, then reaching his hand first to his left shoulder, then to his right.

The guard's eyes remained blank as he watched this furtive version of the sign of the cross. Then he looked down. Thomas followed his gaze to the dust of the road, where the guard's hulking right foot had drawn the two curved lines which a child uses for its sketch of a fish—and which the Christians in the catacombs had employed as a punning symbol of their faith. His boot scuffed out the fish as he called to his unseen mate, "'s OK, Fred!" and added, "Get going, mister."

The robass waited until they were out of earshot before it observed, "Pretty smart. You will make a secret agent yet."

"How did you see what happened?" Thomas asked. "You don't have any eyes."

"Modified psi factor. Much more efficient."

"Then . . ." Thomas hesitated. "Does that mean you can read my thoughts?"

"Only a very little. Do not let it worry you. What I can read does not interest me it is such nonsense."

"Thank you," said Thomas.

"To believe in God. Bah." (It was the first time Thomas had ever heard that word pronounced just as it is written.) "I have a perfectly constructed logical mind that cannot commit such errors."

"I have a friend," Thomas

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smiled, "who is infallible too. But only on occasions and then only because God is with him."

"No human being is infallible."

"Then imperfection," asked Thomas, suddenly feeling a little of the spirit of the aged Jesuit who had taught him philosophy, "has been able to create perfection?"

"Do not quibble," said the robass. "That is no more absurd than your own belief that God who is perfection created man who is imperfection."

Thomas wished that his old teacher were here to answer that one. At the same time he took some comfort in the fact that, retort and all, the robass had still not answered his own objection. "I am not sure," he said, "that this comes under the head of conversation - to - entertain - the - way - weary-traveler. Let us suspend debate while you tell me what, if anything, robots do believe."

"What we have been fed."

"But your minds work on that; surely they must evolve ideas of their own?"

"Sometimes they do and if they are fed imperfect data they may evolve very strange ideas. I have heard of one robot on an isolated space station who worshiped a God of robots and would not believe that any man had created him."

"I suppose," Thomas mused, "he argued that he had hardly been created in our image. I am glad that we—at least they, the Technarchs—have wisely made only usuform robots like you, each shaped for his function, and never tried to reproduce man himself."

"It would not be logical," said the robass. "Man is an all-purpose machine but not well designed for any one purpose. And yet I have heard that once . . ."

The voice stopped abruptly in midsentence.

So even robots have their dreams, Thomas thought. That once there existed a super-robot in the image of his creator Man. From that thought could be developed a whole robotic theology . . .

Suddenly Thomas realized that he had dozed again and again been waked by an abrupt stop. He looked around. They were at the foot of a mountain—presumably the mountain on his map, long ago named for the Devil but now perhaps sanctified beyond measure—and there was no one else anywhere in sight.

"All right," the robass said. "By now I show plenty of dust and wear and tear and I can show you how to adjust my mileage recorder. You can have supper and a good night's sleep and we can go back."

Thomas gasped. "But my mission is to find Aquin. I can sleep while you go on. You don't need

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any sort of rest or anything, do you?" he added considerately.

"Of course not. But what is your mission."

"To find Aquin," Thomas repeated patiently. "I don't know what details have been—what is it you say?—fed into you. But reports have reached His Holiness of an extremely saintly man who lived many years ago in this area—"

"I know I know I know," said the robass. "His logic was such that everyone who heard him was converted to the Church and do not I wish that I had been there to put in a word or two and since he died his secret tomb has become a place of pilgrimage and many are the miracles that are wrought there above all the greatest sign of sanctity that his body has been preserved incorruptible and in these times you need signs and wonders for the people."

Thomas frowned. It all sounded hideously irreverent and contrived when stated in that deadly inhuman monotone. When His Holiness had spoken of Aquin, one thought of the glory of a man of God upon earth—the eloquence of St. John Chrysostom, the cogency of St. Thomas Aquinas, the poetry of St. John of the Cross . . . and above all that physical miracle vouchsafed to few even of the saints, the supernatural preservation of the flesh . . . "for Thou shalt not suffer Thy holy one to see corruption . . ."

But the robass spoke, and one thought of cheap showmanship hunting for a Cardiff Giant to pull in the mobs . . .

The robass spoke again. "Your mission is not to find Aquin. It is to report that you have found him. Then your occasionally infallible friend can with a reasonably clear conscience canonize him and proclaim a new miracle and many will be the converts and greatly will the faith of the flock be strengthened. And in these days of difficult travel who will go on pilgrimages and find out that there is no more Aquin than there is God."

"Faith cannot be based on a lie," said Thomas.

"No," said the robass. "I do not mean no period. I mean no question mark with an ironical inflection. This speech problem must surely have been conquered in that one perfect . . ."

Again he stopped in midsentence. But before Thomas could speak he had resumed, "Does it matter what small untruth leads people into the Church if once they are in they will believe what you think to be the great truths. The report is all that is needed not the discovery. Comfortable though I am you are already tired of traveling very tired you have many small muscular aches from sustaining an unaccustomed posi-

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tion and with the best intentions I am bound to jolt a little a jolting which will get worse as we ascend the mountain and I am forced to adjust my legs disproportionately to each other but proportionately to the slope. You will find the remainder of this trip twice as uncomfortable as what has gone before. The fact that you do not seek to interrupt me indicates that you do not disagree do you. You know that the only sensible thing is to sleep here on the ground for a change and start back in the morning or even stay here two days resting to make a more plausible lapse of time. Then you can make your report and—"

Somewhere in the recess of his somnolent mind Thomas uttered the names, "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" Gradually through these recesses began to filter a realization that an absolutely uninflected monotone is admirably adapted to hypnotic purposes.

"Retro me, Satanas!" Thomas exclaimed aloud, then added, "Up the mountain. That is an order and you must obey."

"I obey," said the robass. "But what did you say before that."

"I beg your pardon," said Thomas. "I must start teaching you Latin."

The little mountain village was too small to be considered an inhabited area worthy of guard-control and passes; but it did possess an inn of sorts.

As Thomas dismounted from the robass, he began fully to realize the accuracy of those remarks about small muscular aches, but he tried to show his discomfort as little as possible. He was in no mood to give the modified psi factor the chance of registering the thought, "I told you so."

The waitress at the inn was obviously a Martian-American hybrid. The highly developed Martian chest expansion and the highly developed American breasts made a spectacular combination. Her smile was all that a stranger could, and conceivably a trifle more than he should ask; and she was eagerly ready, not only with prompt service of passable food, but with full details of what little information there was to offer about the mountain settlement.

But she showed no reaction at all when Thomas offhandedly arranged two knives in what might have been an X.

As he stretched his legs after breakfast, Thomas thought of her chest and breasts—purely, of course, as a symbol of the extraordinary nature of her origin. What a sign of the divine care for His creatures that these two races, separated for countless eons, should prove fertile to each other!

And yet there remained the fact that the offspring, such as this

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girl, were sterile to both races—a fact that had proved both convenient and profitable to certain unspeakable interplanetary entrepreneurs. And what did that fact teach us as to the Divine Plan?

Hastily Thomas reminded himself that he had not yet said his morning office.

It was close to evening when Thomas returned to the robass stationed before the inn. Even though he had expected nothing in one day, he was still unreasonably disappointed. Miracles should move faster.

He knew these backwater villages, where those drifted who were either useless to or resentful of the Technarchy. The technically high civilization of the Technarchic Empire, on all three planets, existed only in scattered metropolitan centers near major blasting ports. Elsewhere, aside from the areas of total devastation, the drifters, the morons, the malcontents had subsided into a crude existence a thousand years old, in hamlets which might go a year without even seeing a Loyalty Checker—though by some mysterious grapevine (and Thomas began to think again about modified psi factors) any unexpected technological advance in one of these hamlets would bring Checkers by the swarm.

He had talked with stupid men, he had talked with lazy men, he had talked with clever and angry men. But he had not talked with any man who responded to his unobtrusive signs, any man to whom he would dare ask a question containing the name of Aquin.

"Any luck," said the robass, and added "question mark."

"I wonder if you ought to talk to me in public," said Thomas a little irritably. "I doubt if these villagers know about talking robots."

"It is time that they learned then. But if it embarrasses you you may order me to stop."

"I'm tired," said Thomas. "Tired beyond embarrassment. And to answer your question mark, no. No luck at all. Exclamation point."

"We will go back tonight then," said the robass.

"I hope you meant that with a question mark. The answer," said Thomas hesitantly, "is no. I think we ought to stay overnight anyway. People always gather at the inn of an evening. There's a chance of picking up something."

"Ha, ha," said the robass.

"That is a laugh?" Thomas inquired.

"I wished to express the fact that I had recognized the humor in your pun."

"My pun?"

"I was thinking the same thing myself. The waitress is by hu-

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manoid standards very attractive, well worth picking up."

"Now look. You know I meant nothing of the kind. You know that I'm a—" He broke off. It was hardly wise to utter the word *priest* aloud.

"And you know very well that the celibacy of the clergy is a matter of discipline and not of doctrine. Under your own Pope priests of other rites such as the Byzantine and the Anglican are free of vows of celibacy. And even within the Roman rite to which you belong there have been eras in history when that vow was not taken seriously even on the highest levels of the priesthood. You are tired you need refreshment both in body and in spirit you need comfort and warmth. For is it not written in the book of the prophet Isaiah Rejoice for joy with her that ye may be satisfied with the breasts of her consolation and is it—"

"Hell!" Thomas exploded suddenly. "Stop it before you begin quoting the Song of Solomon. Which is strictly an allegory concerning the love of Christ for His Church, or so they kept telling me in seminary."

"You see how fragile and human you are," said the robass. "I a robot have caused you to swear."

"*Distinguo,*" said Thomas smugly. "I said *Hell,* which is certainly not taking the name of *my* Lord in vain." He walked into the inn feeling momentarily satisfied with himself . . . and markedly puzzled as to the extent and variety of data that seemed to have been "fed into" the robass.

Never afterward was Thomas able to reconstruct that evening in absolute clarity.

It was undoubtedly because he was irritated—with the robass, with his mission, and with himself—that he drank at all of the crude local wine. It was undoubtedly because he was so physically exhausted that it affected him so promptly and unexpectedly.

He had flashes of memory. A moment of spilling a glass over himself and thinking. "How fortunate that clerical garments are forbidden so that no one can recognize the disgrace of a man of the cloth!" A moment of listening to a bawdy set of verses of *A Space-suit Built for Two,* and another moment of his interrupting the singing with a sonorous declamation of passages from the *Song of Songs* in Latin.

He was never sure whether one remembered moment was real or imaginary. He could taste a warm mouth and feel the tingling of his fingers at the touch of Martian-American flesh; but he was never certain whether this was true memory or part of the Ashtaroth-begotten dream that had begun to ride him.

Nor was he ever certain which

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of his symbols, or to whom, was so blatantly and clumsily executed as to bring forth a gleeful shout of "God-damned Christian dog!" He did remember marveling that those who most resolutely disbelieved in God still needed Him to blaspheme by. And then the torment began.

He never knew whether or not a mouth had touched his lips, but there was no question that many solid fists had found them. He never knew whether his fingers had touched breasts, but they had certainly been trampled by heavy heels. He remembered a face that laughed aloud while its owner swung the chair that broke two ribs. He remembered another face with red wine dripping over it from an upheld bottle, and he remembered the gleam of the candlelight on the bottle as it swung down.

The next he remembered was the ditch and the morning and the cold. It was particularly cold because all of his clothes were gone, along with much of his skin. He could not move: He could only lie there and look.

He saw them walk by, the ones he had spoken with yesterday, the ones who had been friendly. He saw them glance at him and turn their eyes quickly away. He saw the waitress pass by. She did not even glance; she knew what was in the ditch.

The robass was nowhere in sight. He tried to project his thoughts, tried desperately to hope in the psi factor.

A man whom Thomas had not seen before was coming along fingering the buttons of his coat. There were ten small buttons and one large one, and the man's lips were moving silently.

This man looked into the ditch. He paused a moment and looked around him. There was a shout of loud laughter somewhere in the near distance.

The Christian hastily walked on down the pathway, devoutly saying his button-rosary.

Thomas closed his eyes.

He opened them on a small neat room. They moved from the rough wooden walls to the rough but clean and warm blankets that covered him. Then they moved to the lean dark face that was smiling over him.

"You feel better now?" a deep voice asked. "I know. You want to say 'Where am I?' and you think it will sound foolish. You are at the inn. It is the only good room."

"I can't afford—" Thomas started to say. Then he remembered that he could afford literally nothing. Even his few emergency credits had vanished when he was stripped.

"It's all right. For the time being, I'm paying," said the deep voice. "You feel like maybe a little food?"

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"Perhaps a little herring," said Thomas . . . and was asleep within the next minute.

When he next awoke there was a cup of hot coffee beside him. The real thing, too, he promptly discovered. Then the deep voice said apologetically, "Sandwiches. It is all they have in the inn today."

Only on the second sandwich did Thomas pause long enough to notice that it was smoked swamphog, one of his favorite meats. He ate the second with greater leisure, and was reaching for a third when the dark man said, "Maybe that is enough for now. The rest later."

Thomas gestured at the plate. "Won't you have one?"

"No thank you. They are all swamphog."

Confused thoughts went through Thomas' mind. The Venusian swamphog is a ruminant. Its hoofs are not cloven. He tried to remember what he had once known of Mosaic dietary law. Someplace in Leviticus, wasn't it?

The dark man followed his thoughts. "*Treff*," he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Not kosher."

Thomas frowned. "You admit to me that you're an Orthodox Jew? How can you trust me? How do you know I'm not a Checker?"

"Believe me, I trust you. You were very sick when I brought you here. I sent everybody away because I did not trust them to hear things you said . . . Father," he added lightly.

Thomas struggled with words. "I . . . I didn't deserve you. I was drunk and disgraced myself and my office. And when I was lying there in the ditch I didn't even think to pray. I put my trust in . . . God help me in the modified psi factor of a robass!"

"And He did help you," the Jew reminded him. "Or He allowed me to."

"And they all walked by," Thomas groaned. "Even one that was saying his rosary. He went right on by. And then you come along—the good Samaritan."

"Believe me," said the Jew wryly, "if there is one thing I'm not, it's a Samaritan. Now go to sleep again. I will try to find your robass . . . and the other thing."

He had left the room before Thomas could ask him what he meant.

Later that day the Jew—Abraham, his name was—reported that the robass was safely sheltered from the weather behind the inn. Apparently it had been wise enough not to startle him by engaging in conversation.

It was not until the next day that he reported on "the other thing."

"Believe me, Father," he said gently, "after nursing you there's little I don't know about who you are and why you're here. Now

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there are some Christians here I know, and they know me. We trust each other. Jews may still be hated; but no longer, God be praised, by worshipers of the same Lord. So I explained about you. One of them," he added with a smile, "turned very red."

"God has forgiven him," said Thomas. "There were people near —the same people who attacked me. Could he be expected to risk his life for mine?"

"I seem to recall that that is precisely what your Messiah did expect. But who's being particular? Now that they know who you are, they want to help you. See: they gave me this map for you. The trail is steep and tricky; it's good you have the robass. They ask just one favor of you: When you come back will you hear their confession and say Mass? There's a cave near here where it's safe."

"Of course. These friends of yours, they've told you about Aquin?"

The Jew hesitated a long time before he said slowly, "Yes . . ."

"And . . . ?"

"Believe me, my friend, I don't know. So it seems a miracle. It helps to keep their faith alive. My own faith . . . *nu,* it's lived for a long time on miracles three thousand years old and more. Perhaps if I had heard Aquin himself . . ."

"You don't mind," Thomas asked, "if I pray for you, in my faith?"

Abraham grinned. "Pray in good health, Father."

The not-quite-healed ribs ached agonizingly as he climbed into the foam saddle. The robass stood patiently while he fed in the coordinates from the map. Not until they were well away from the village did it speak.

"Anyway," it said, "now you're safe for good."

"What do you mean?"

"As soon as we get down from the mountain you deliberately look up a Checker. You turn in the Jew. From then on you are down in the books as a faithful servant of the Technarchy and you have not harmed a hair of the head of one of your own flock."

Thomas snorted. "You're slipping, Satan. That one doesn't even remotely tempt me. It's inconceivable."

"I did best did not I with the breasts. Your God has said it the spirit indeed is willing but the flesh is weak."

"And right now," said Thomas, "the flesh is too weak for even fleshly temptations. Save your breath . . . or whatever it is you use."

They climbed the mountain in silence. The trail indicated by the coordinates was a winding and confused one, obviously designed

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deliberately to baffle any possible Checkers.

Suddenly Thomas roused himself from his button-rosary (on a coat lent by the Christian who had passed by) with a startled "Hey!" as the robass plunged directly into a heavy thicket of bushes.

"Coordinates say so," the robass stated tersely.

For a moment Thomas felt like the man in the nursery rhyme who fell into a bramble bush and scratched out both his eyes. Then the bushes were gone, and they were plodding along a damp narrow passageway through solid stone, in which even the robass seemed to have some difficulty with his footing.

Then they were in a rocky chamber some four meters high and ten in diameter, and there on a sort of crude stone catafalque lay the uncorrupted body of a man.

Thomas slipped from the foam saddle, groaning as his ribs stabbed him, sank to his knees, and offered up a wordless hymn of gratitude. He smiled at the robass and hoped the psi factor could detect the elements of pity and triumph in that smile.

Then a frown of doubt crossed his face as he approached the body. "In canonization proceedings in the old time," he said, as much to himself as to the robass, "they used to have what they called a devil's advocate, whose duty it was to throw every possible doubt on the evidence."

"You would be well cast in such a role Thomas," said the robass.

"If I were," Thomas muttered, "I'd wonder about caves. Some of them have peculiar properties of preserving bodies by a sort of mummification . . ."

The robass had clumped close to the catafalque. "This body is not mummified," he said. "Do not worry."

"Can the psi factor tell you that much?" Thomas smiled.

"No," said the robass. "But I will show you why Aquin could never be mummified."

He raised his articulated foreleg and brought its hoof down hard on the hand of the body. Thomas cried out with horror at the sacrilege—then stared hard at the crushed hand.

There was no blood, no ichor of embalming, no bruised flesh. Nothing but a shredded skin and beneath it an intricate mass of plastic tubes and metal wires.

The silence was long. Finally the robass said, "It was well that you should know. Only you of course."

"And all the time," Thomas gasped, "my sought-for saint was only your dream . . . the one perfect robot in man's form."

"His maker died and his secrets were lost," the robass said. "No matter we will find them again."

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"All for nothing. For less than nothing. The 'miracle' was wrought by the Technarchy."

"When Aquin died," the robass went on, "and put died in quotation marks it was because he suffered some mechanical defects and did not dare have himself repaired because that would reveal his nature. This is for you only to know. Your report of course will be that you found the body of Aquin it was unimpaired and indeed incorruptible. That is the truth and nothing but the truth if it is not the whole truth who is to care. Let your infallible friend use the report and you will not find him ungrateful I assure you."

"Holy Spirit, give me grace and wisdom," Thomas muttered.

"Your mission has been successful. We will return now the Church will grow and your God will gain many more worshipers to hymn His praise into His nonexistent ears."

"Damn you!" Thomas exclaimed. "And that would be indeed a curse if you had a soul to damn."

"You are certain that I have not," said the robass. "Question mark."

"I know what you are. You are in very truth the devil, prowling about the world seeking the destruction of men. You are the business that prowls in the dark. You are a purely functional robot constructed and fed to tempt me, and the tape of your data is the tape of Screwtape."

"Not to tempt you," said the robass. "Not to destroy you. To guide and save you. Our best calculators indicate a probability of 51.5 per cent that within twenty years you will be the next Pope. If I can teach you wisdom and practicality in your actions the probability can rise as high as 97.2 or very nearly to certainty. Do not you wish to see the Church governed as you know you can govern it. If you report failure on this mission you will be out of favor with your friend who is as even you admit fallible at most times. You will lose the advantages of position and contact that can lead you to the cardinal's red hat even though you may never wear it under the Technarchy and from there to—"

"Stop!" Thomas' face was alight and his eyes aglow with something the psi factor had never detected there before. "It's all the other way round, don't you see? *This* is the triumph! *This* is the perfect ending to the quest!"

The articulated foreleg brushed the injured hand. "This question mark."

"This is *your* dream. This is *your* perfection. And what came of this perfection? This perfect logical brain — this all-purpose brain, not functionally specialized like yours—knew that it was made by man, and its reason forced it

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to believe that man was made by God. And it saw that its duty lay to man its maker, and beyond him to his Maker, God. Its duty was to convict man, to augment the glory of God. And it converted by the pure force of its perfect brain!

"Now I understand the name Aquin," he went on to himself. "We've known of Thomas Aquinas, the Angelic Doctor, the perfect reasoner of the church. His writings are lost, but surely somewhere in the world we can find a copy. We can train our young men to develop his reasoning still further. We have trusted too long in faith alone; this is not an age of faith. We must call reason into our service — and Aquin has shown us that perfect reason can lead only to God!"

"Then it is all the more necessary that you increase the probabilities of becoming Pope to carry out this program. Get in the foam saddle we will go back and on the way I will teach you little things that will be useful in making certain—"

"No," said Thomas. "I am not so strong as St. Paul, who could glory in his imperfections and rejoice that he had been given an imp of Satan to buffet him. No; I will rather pray with the Saviour, 'Lead us not into temptation.' I know myself a little. I am weak and full of uncertainties and you are very clever. Go. I'll find my way back alone."

"You are a sick man. Your ribs are broken and they ache. You can never make the trip by yourself you need my help. If you wish you can order me to be silent. It is most necessary to the Church that you get back safely to the Pope with your report you cannot put yourself before the Church."

"Go!" Thomas cried. "Go back to Nicodemus . . . or Judas! That is an order. Obey!"

"You do not think do you that I was really conditioned to obey your orders. I will wait in the village. If you get that far you will rejoice at the sight of me."

The legs of the robass clumped off down the stone passageway. As their sound died away, Thomas fell to his knees beside the body of that which he could hardly help thinking of as St. Aquin the Robot.

His ribs hurt more excruciatingly than ever. The trip alone would be a terrible one . . .

His prayers arose, as the text has it, like clouds of incense, and as shapeless as those clouds. But through all his thoughts ran the cry of the father of the epileptic in Caesarea Philippi:

I believe, O Lord; help thou mine unbelief!

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Isaac Asimov, as anyone who knows him will tell you, likes to talk. Unsurprising then that he should be caught talking about the weather. What is surprising is what he says—that despite Mark Twain's worn precept, people are doing things about the weather all the time, whether they know it or not, and the results of what we are all doing are even now beginning to be apparent....

No More Ice Ages?

by Isaac Asimov

WE ALL KNOW THAT THE RADIOactive ash resulting from the activities of nuclear power plants is dangerous and its disposal a problem to be brooded over. How different from those nice, decent, non-radioactive, old-fashioned coal-burning (or oil-burning) power plants. As science-fiction fans, we can easily put ourselves into the position of a gentleman of the 25th Century, and can imagine ourselves moaning for the good old days.

Except that the gentleman of the 25th Century may well be sitting there cursing the good old days, as he pushes his air-conditioner up a notch and wishes that nuclear reactors—even with all the problems of radioactive ash—had taken over a few centuries sooner than they did.

For coal and oil release an ash also, and that ash is also puffed into the atmosphere—and that ash has its own potentially great danger.

The ash of coal and oil isn't radioactive to be sure; it is only good old harmless carbon dioxide, which is already present in the atmosphere, anyway. And it is only a minor constituent of the atmosphere, 0.04 percent by weight, which nonetheless comes out into big numbers if all the air Earth has is lumped into the scale. The weight of our atmosphere is 5.70×10^{15} tons, so the weight of the carbon dioxide in our atmosphere is about 2.28 x

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10^{12} (about two and a quarter trillion) tons.

That carbon dioxide, however, is subjected to some tremendous pushes and pulls. For instance, all plant life depends on the consumption of atmospheric carbon dioxide. Using the energy of sunlight and hydrogen atoms (obtained from water molecules), the plants convert the carbon dioxide to carbohydrate and then to all the other organic molecules necessary to plant structure and chemistry.

Lump all the plant life of land and sea (especially the sea where the algae use up eight times as much carbon dioxide as all land plants put together), and a considerable amount of the gas is used up. Estimates for the carbon dioxide used up by plant life in one year vary from 60 to 200 billion tons. Even allowing the lower figure, it would seem that the carbon dioxide supply of the atmosphere would be used up in about 36 years. The larger figure will consume it in less than 12 years . . . Then all life comes to an end?

No—because when a plant dies, bacteria attack the tissues and convert the carbon content back to carbon dioxide. And plants are at the mercy of marauding animals which do not utilize atmospheric carbon dioxide but get their energy supplies by tearing down what the plants have built up. They *form* carbon dioxide as the result of their life processes and exhale it back into the atmosphere.

So there is a carbon dioxide cycle, with plants using it up and animals and bacteria forming it again. If animals gain a temporary ascendancy, plant life is killed off at too rapid a rate and enough animals starve to allow plants a chance to revive. If they revive too far, animals multiply in the lush environment and cut the plants down once more. So there are minor oscillations which (if never allowed to oscillate too far in either direction, and so far —knock wood — they haven't) average out, in the long run, into perfect balance.

Well, not in perfect balance. There are leaks in both directions.

For instance, some dead plant tissues don't get consumed by bacteria but get covered by muck and mire and clamped down underground, where, under heat and pressure, the organic molecules are slowly stripped of everything but carbon and hydrogen, and sometimes all the way to carbon only. Thus, oil and coal are formed and the carbon atoms contained therein are withdrawn permanently (or for hundreds of millions of years anyway) from the carbon dioxide pool of the air.

Also, carbon dioxide may react with the inorganic rocks to form

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insoluble carbonates and may be removed more or less permanently in that way.

Balancing both leaks out of the atmosphere is new carbon dioxide leaking into the atmosphere as the result of volcanic action.

With leaks in *both* directions, there is the possibility of balance still. At the present time, in fact, there is such a balance. About 15 to 30 million tons of carbon dioxide are removed permanently from the atmosphere each year as coal or insoluble carbonate. The same amount is restored each year by volcanic action. (Notice that the inorganic contribution to the cycle is not more than 0.05 percent of the biochemical contribution. Here's an example of the importance of life on a planetary scale.)

Still, did the leaks always balance? After all, there may have been periods in Earth's history when the leak in one direction or another became particularly prominent. There were long periods of time when coal-formation proceeded at an unusually high rate. The trillions of tons of coal that are buried underground have all been withdrawn, however slowly, from the carbon dioxide pool of the air. Was that large scale withdrawal replaced?

Again, during periods of mountain building, new rock is exposed to the atmosphere. Much more carbon dioxide than usual is used up in weathering and in the formation of insoluble carbonates. Is that carbon dioxide replaced?

On the other hand, there are periods of increased volcanic activity when more carbon dioxide is poured into the atmosphere than is true of most times.

Now, does all this change the carbon dioxide content of the atmosphere from geologic era to geologic era? Probably yes, even if only slightly.

But if only slightly, does it matter? The answer to that is that some scientists think, yes, it matters a great deal.

The major components of the atmosphere (oxygen and nitrogen) are excellent transmitters of radiant energy over a broad stretch of wavelengths. The light rays of the Sun hit the air, pass through a hundred miles of it, hit the surface of the Earth, and are absorbed. The Earth heats up. The heated Earth radiates energy at night back into space, in the form of the far less energetic infra-red. This also passes through the atmosphere. The warmer Earth grows, the more heat is radiated away at night. At some particular equilibrium temperature, the net loss of radiation by Earth at night equals that gained by day so that, once that temperature (whatever it is) is reached, the Earth as a whole neither warms nor cools with time (barring internal radioactivity).

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Of course, individual portions of it may warm and cool with the seasons but this averages out, taken over the whole planetary surface.

Carbon dioxide, however, introduces a complication. It lets light rays through as easily as do oxygen and nitrogen, but it absorbs infra-red rather strongly. This means that Earth's nighttime radiation finds the atmosphere partially opaque and some doesn't get through. The result is that the equilibrium temperature must rise a few degrees to reach the point where enough infra-red is forced out into space to balance the Solar input. The Earth is warmer (on the whole) than it would be if there were no carbon dioxide at all in the atmosphere. This warming effect of carbon dioxide is called the "greenhouse effect."

If there were a period of increased weathering or coal formation, so that the general carbon dioxide level of the atmosphere were to sink, the greenhouse effect would decrease and the Earth's overall temperature would drop. If volcanic action were to increase the carbon dioxide level, the overall temperature would rise.

A recent set of calculations indicate that if the present carbon dioxide level should double, the overall temperature of the Earth would rise by 3.6° C. (6.5 Fahrenheit). If it were to halve, the temperature would drop 3.8° C. (6.8 Fahrenheit).

To start an ice age going, you do not require a catastrophic temperature drop. The drop need be just enough to allow a little more snow to fall during the slightly colder winter than can be melted by the succeeding slightly cooler summer. Repeat this year after year and the glaciers begin advancing. The chilled air and water drifting down from the north make the summers cooler than ever and the process accelters a great deal.

The amount of temperature drop below the present level required to bring this about is not certainly known. Figures varying from a drop of 1.5° to 8° C. have been suggested. Adopting a middle-of-the-road position, cutting the carbon dioxide of the atmosphere in half (from 0.04 to 0.02 percent) would drop the temperature 3.8° C. and that might be enough to start an ice age and perhaps this was actually the trigger of the ice ages in Earth's history.

A rise of 3° or 4°, on the other hand, would allow the slightly warmer summers to melt just a little bit more ice than can be replaced by the snows of the succeeding slightly milder winters. The ice caps would melt and, eventually, disappear. There are currently 23 million cubic kilo-

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meters of ice in the world (mostly in Antarctica) and if all this were to melt, the volume of the oceans would increase by 1.7 percent, the sea-level would rise about 60 yards, and the low coastal areas of the world would be flooded. (The Empire State Building would be in water to nearly the 20th story—except that there would almost certainly be time to protect New York with levees.)

Obviously neither ice age nor world-wide tropics is desirable. Where we are is nice. But are we sure we are balanced, or is there a slight trend one way or the other. Well, if there is, the trend is so slight we need not worry for a million years—except for one thing.

Homo sapiens is throwing a monkey wrench into the machinery. We ourselves are upsetting the levels by burning coal and oil in our, as aforesaid, nice, decent, non-radioactive, old-fashioned coal-burning (or oil-burning) power plants.

Until about 1900, the amount of carbon dioxide we formed in this manner was negligible. However, our industrialized 20th Century has been utilizing the "fossil fuels" in a logarithmically increasing fashion, and the carbon dioxide that leaked out of the atmosphere over the space of a hundred million years of coal-forming is now being poured back into the atmosphere in a hundred million simultaneous puffs of smoke.

At the moment, we are adding 6 billion tons of carbon dioxide to the air each year (two hundred times as much as is being added by volcanic action and at least a fiftieth as much as is being added by life activity proper). And the rate is still increasing.

Even if we don't increase the rate, we will double the amount of carbon dioxide in the air (assuming there is no counteracting factor), raise the overall temperature of the Earth 3.8° C. (and make a healthy start at melting the ice-caps in toto and drowning the coastal areas), in a mere 350 years.

So much for our nice, decent, non-radioactive, old-fashioned coal-burning (or oil-burning) power plants.

Unless there is a counteracting factor. But is there?

Answer: maybe.

The first possibility is that as the atmospheric level of carbon dioxide goes up, plant life might luxuriate correspondingly, use the carbon dioxide faster, and bring the level down again. This would happen to begin with, probably. But then the natural interplay of life would balance it. More plants alive means more plants dying and decaying. It also means more animals to eat those plants. More decay and more animals means more carbon dioxide produced.

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The level would go back up again.

In other words, increasing the carbon dioxide of the air would speed up the carbon dioxide cycle but would not introduce a corrective influence. If we increased the carbon dioxide content of the air, it would stay increased, for all life processes could do about it.

But there is another factor. Leaving water vapor out of account, only one of the normal components of the air, carbon dioxide, is appreciably soluble in water. At 0° C., for instance, a milliliter (abbreviated ml.) of pure water will dissolve 0.0233 cubic centimeters (abbreviated cc.) of nitrogen, and 0.0489 cc. of oxygen; but it will dissolve 1.713 cc. of carbon dioxide.

Now the oceans on Earth (which make up more than 98 percent of Earth's total water supply) contain a total of 1.37 x 10^{24} ml. of an aqueous salt solution. If this all held carbon dioxide at the rate of 1.713 cc. per ml. (so that the oceans fizzed like a planet-full of soda water) there would be 2.35 x 10^{24} cc. of carbon dioxide in solution. That would come, in weight, to 5.1 x 10^{15} tons, or about 2250 times as much carbon dioxide as there is in our entire atmosphere.

And actually this is a conservative estimate, since the solubility figures I have given are for pure water. This solubility goes up if the water is made alkaline, and sea water is, indeed, somewhat alkaline.

If the ocean can dissolve so much carbon dioxide, it seems odd that there remains any significant quantity of the gas in the atmosphere, unless the ocean happens already to be saturated with it. It is nowhere near saturated, but the solution of carbon dioxide depends on a number of local factors (temperature, pressure, acidity, salinity, the life-processes of ocean-dwelling organisms, etc.). Things are not as simple as they would be if we put the oceans in a beaker, and bubbled the atmosphere through it, stirring vigorously all the while.

By actual measurement, it has been estimated that the total carbon dioxide in the oceans is only 50 times that contained in the atmosphere, and is thus considerably short of the saturation point.

Still if this is the equilibrium, why shouldn't it be maintained when mankind goes about pouring carbon dioxide into the atmosphere while burning coal and oil. In other words, since 98 percent of Earth's carbon dioxide is in the oceans, why shouldn't 98 percent of Earth's *new* carbon dioxide go into the oceans.

If the ocean did, in fact, dissolve 98 percent of new carbon dioxide as formed, the danger of tropicalization of Earth would re-

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cede. Instead of having the carbon dioxide level double and Earth turn tropical in 350 years, it would take 350 x 50 or 17,500 years to do so, and, heck, in that time, we'll think of something—we'll think of something—

However, the point of equilibrium is one thing and usually fairly easy to determine. *The rate at which equilibrium is reached* is quite another and often difficult to determine.

Yes, the ocean can dissolve the 6 billion tons of carbon dioxide we produce each year by burning coal and oil. There is plenty of room for it there. The ocean can hold eight million times that quantity as a very minimum, over and above what it already holds. (This might create trouble for fish and other marine life, but in eight million years we can solve that too, perhaps.)

Nevertheless, though the oceans can dissolve carbon dioxide, will they do so quickly enough? If they will dissolve 6 billion tons in a year, they keep pace with us, and all is well. If they dissolve it in a thousand years, we have produced 6000 billion tons of carbon dioxide (probably much more—assuming, of course, that we stick to coal-burning and don't switch to fission or fusion in the meantime), meanwhile, and we are out of luck. And the latter timetable is probably far more accurate than the former.

You see, the solution only takes place at the surface of the ocean where air and water meet. If the surface skin gets loaded with carbon dioxide, no more will dissolve. It won't matter that the water just under the skin is empty. The rate of solution will then depend on how fast the carbon dioxide molecules drift downward and empty the skin again, or how fast the ocean water moves about so that fresh water reaches the skin where it can dissolve additional carbon dioxide.

The latter process would seem to solve the problem, since we all know that the ocean is always in a lashing turmoil. Surely, then, it is well-mixed, with fresh water reaching the surface all the time.

Right—if we consider only the top 600 feet of ocean. Just as all the storms of our atmosphere are confined to the troposphere (the lowest 5 to 10 miles), so all the wild water-movements of the ocean are confined to the top 600 feet or less. Below 600 feet there is only a slow, majestic movement, exactly how slow and majestic we are not yet certain. The rate of carbon dioxide solution, then, depends on how quickly that deep water (representing about 94 percent of the total ocean volume) is brought to the surface.

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There is some sort of circulation between the depths and the surface, we know. After all, the ocean can't dissolve oxygen by any means more magical than it can dissolve carbon dioxide, and yet there is oxygen dissolved in the ocean all the way down to the lowest abysses. We know that, because there is animal life in those abysses that could not live in the absence of oxygen.

The longer the water stays down in the depths without renewal, the lower the oxygen concentration becomes, through consumption by living organisms. This offers one method of following water circulation in the abyss. Bring up samples of deep water from, say 3 miles down, and measure the oxygen content. The higher the oxygen content, the more recently that water was at the surface.

Such measurements have been made, and it turns out that the deep water with highest oxygen content is in the North Atlantic and around Antarctica. Apparently, that is where surface water sinks to the bottom most readily. On the bottom there seems to be a slow movement that carries the water out of the Atlantic, around Africa, into the Indian Ocean, through the South Seas and into the Pacific—with the oxygen content declining constantly.

Granted that such an abyssal circulation does exist, how fast does it move? We might find out by noting the rate at which oxygen concentration declines at different spots of the depths along the line of watery march. For this we would also need to know something about the rate at which abyssal life consumes oxygen, since the rapidity of decline depends upon the rapidity of oxygen consumption as well as the rapidity of the circulation.

Now if we only had something that could be added fresh to the ocean; something that wasn't there to begin with; something that would not be consumed by life-forms; and something that we could detect in extremely small amounts so that we could still study it after it has been diluted by all the oceans of the world.

Actually, there may be something that fits the bill—strontium-90. There is a detectable quantity in the atmosphere now and there wasn't any fifteen years ago. Some has gotten into the ocean's skin but is there any already in the deep waters? If so, where? Chemists at Clark University are now devising methods of concentrating and measuring the strontium-90 in the ocean in order to find out.

It would be odd if it turned out that the dangerous ash, strontium-90, were to give us vital information involving the dangers of the

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"harmless" ash, carbon dioxide. It's an ill wind—

(The abyssal circulation is important not only with respect to information concerning the carbon dioxide cycle. The lower waters are richer in minerals—hence, more fertile—than the life-scavenged upper waters. If the time comes when man depends on the sea for most of his food, a knowledge of abyssal circulation may be vital for "ocean-farming.")

Of course, why just theorize as to how fast the ocean *may* dissolve carbon dioxide, how slowly the atmospheric carbon dioxide *may* be building up, how quickly the Earth *may* be turning into an ice-less tropical world. Why not actually measure the ice-caps of the world and see if they are disappearing or not? And if they are disappearing, how quickly? This, in fact, is one of the prime objects of research for the Geophysical Year and one of the more important reasons for all those scientists setting up housekeeping on the Antarctic ice-cap.

We might also measure the actual overall temperature of the Earth and see if it is going up. If all the combusted carbon dioxide stays in the atmosphere, dissolving in the oceans at only a negligible rate, then the overall temperature ought to go up 1.1° C. per century.

According to Gilbert N. Plass of Johns Hopkins, such temperature measurements as are available indicate that just this rate of temperature increase has indeed been going on since 1900. Of course, temperature measurements during the first half of the 20th Century are not reliable outside the more industrialized countries, so maybe this apparent increase matches the theoretical only through a coincidence arising from insufficient data.

However, if this is more than coincidence, if Earth is really warming up at that rate, then wave good-bye to the ice-caps.

Earth has survived such a fate before; four times (to be specific) in the last 300,000 years, this current rise being the fourth. These periods of rise initiated what are called the "Interglacial Epochs." Earth has also survived four periods of temperature drop, each of which initiated a "Glacial Epoch" or, as it is more commonly known, an "Ice Age." It would, therefore, seem that the glaciers ought to continue coming and going for the immediate future (by which I mean the next few million years).

What puzzles the paleontologists, though, is that prior to 300,000 years ago (for at least 200,000,000 years prior, in fact) there were no Ice Ages. For all that long period (or more) Earth was reasonably ice-free. Naturally, the

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question arises: what happened 300,000 years ago?

One explanation is that Earth undergoes a temperature oscillation of a very slow and majestic type which didn't make itself visible in the form of ice till 300,000 years ago. For instance, a Serbian physicist named Milutin Milankovich suggested in the 1920's that because of oscillations in Earth's orbit and the tilt of its axis, the planet picks up a bit more heat from the Sun at some times than at others. His proposed temperature cycle lasted 40,000 years, so that there is a kind of 20,000-year long "Great Summer" and a 20,000-year long "Great Winter." The temperature differences involved are not really very great, but, as I have stated, a drop of less than 4° C. in Earth's present temperature would probably be enough to kick off an Ice Age.

This Milankovich-oscillation can be made to explain the recent advances and retreats of the glaciers, but what about the situation B.I.A. (Before the Ice Ages)?

Well, what if prior to 300,000 years ago, Earth's overall temperature were sufficiently high so that even the Great Winter dip was not enough to bring on the ice. You can see that, if you consider the annual temperature oscillation between ordinary summer and winter. In New York, this oscillation crosses the freezing point of water, so there is rain in the summer but snow in the winter. In Miami, the average temperature is higher and the oscillation does not dip low enough to bring snow in the winter. On a planetary scale, what if Earth's climate switched from iceless Miami to periodically icy New York?

This possibility has been checked by isotope analysis. (These days, if a scientist can't get an answer by isotope analysis, he ain't hep.) There are three stable oxygen isotopes: oxygen-16, which makes up 99.76 percent of all the oxygen atoms; oxygen-18 (0.20 percent) and oxygen-17 (0.04 percent). They all behave almost alike, so alike that ordinarily no difference can be detected. However, oxygen-18 is 12½ percent heavier than oxygen-16 and correspondingly slower in its reactions. For instance, when water evaporates, water molecules containing oxygen-16 get into the air a bit more easily than those containing oxygen-18, and if evaporation continues over a long interval, the water that is left contains noticeably more oxygen-18 than originally.

This applies to the oceans, which are constantly evaporating, so that sea-water should (and does) have a bit more oxygen-18, in proportion to oxygen-16, than does fresh water, which is made up of the evaporated portion of

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the oceans. Furthermore, this effect is increased as the temperature goes up. For each 1° C. rise in the temperature of the ocean, the ratio of oxygen-18 to oxygen-16 goes up 0.02 percent.

Now then, fossil sea-shells are made up largely of calcium carbonate. The calcium carbonate contains oxygen atoms which were derived from the ocean water. The oxygen-18/oxygen-16 ratio in those shells must therefore reflect the ratio in the water from which they derived the oxygen and that, in turn, should give a measure of the ocean temperatures of ages long past.

Such measurements were first made in the laboratories of Harold C. Urey at the University of Chicago, and proved a very tricky job. On the basis of such measurements, however, it turns out that during the Mesozoic Age, when dinosaurs were bold, the ocean temperatures were as high as 21° C. (70° F.).

This bespeaks a planetary temperature too high to allow an Ice Age, even at the bottom of the Milankovich cycle.

But beginning 80,000,000 years ago, when ocean temperatures were at the 21° peak, temperatures started dropping, and have continued to do so ever since.

According to Cesare Emiliani (who carried temperature measurements into the recent past, geologically speaking), the explanation for this is that, after a long period of land area fairly free of mountains and oceans fairly free of abyss—so that many shallow seas covered much of what is now land—a geological revolution occurred. The ocean bottoms started sinking and mountain ranges started rising.

With land going up and ocean bottoms down, new land was exposed very gradually. Land stores less heat than does water, radiates more away at night, so that the Earth's overall temperature gradually dropped. Also, new land meant new rocks exposed to carbon dioxide weathering, which meant a fall in the carbon dioxide of the atmosphere, a decrease of the "greenhouse effect" and, again, a fall in temperature.

Quite possibly, it was this fall in temperature that killed off the dinosaurs.

By a million years ago, the ocean temperature had dropped to 2° C. (35½ F.), and by 300,000 years ago, Earth's temperature was low enough to allow the Ice Ages to appear at the bottom of the Milankovich cycles.

A somewhat more startling exlanation of the beginning of the Ice Ages has been advanced by Maurice Ewing and William Donn, working at Columbia. They blame it specifically on the Arctic Ocean.

The North Pole is located in a

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small, nearly landlocked arm of the ocean, which is small enough and landlocked enough to make possible an unusual state of affairs.

The suggestion is that when the Arctic Ocean is free of ice, it acts as a reservoir of evaporating water that feeds snow storms in the winter. If the Arctic Ocean were large and open, most of these snow storms would fall on the open sea and there melt. As it is, the snow falls upon the surrounding land areas of Canada and Siberia, and because of the lower heat capacity of land areas, and the large amount of snow, not so much melts in the summer as falls during the winter. Consequently, it accumulates from winter to winter, and the glaciers form and creep southward.

Once this happens, a considerable fraction of the Earth is covered with ice, which reflects more of the Sun's radiation than does either land or water. Furthermore, the Earth as a whole is cloudier and stormier during an Ice Age than otherwise, and the excess clouds also reflect more of the Sun's radiation. Altogether, about 7 percent of the Sun's radiation, that would ordinarily reach Earth, is reflected during an Ice Age. The Earth's temperature drops and the Arctic Ocean, which (according to Ewing and Donn) remained open during the height of glacier activity, finally freezes over. (It wouldn't freeze despite the lowering temperature, if it were not so small and landlocked.)

Once the Arctic freezes over, the amount of evaporation from it is drastically decreased; the snow storms over Canada and Siberia are cut down, the summers (cool as they are) suffice to melt more than the decreased winter fall, and the glaciers start retreating. The Earth warms up again (as it is now doing), the Arctic Ocean melts (this point not yet having been reached at the present stage of the cycle), the snows begin again and bang comes another glaciation.

And why did all this only start 300,000 years ago? Ewing and Donn say it is because that is when the North Pole first found itself in the Arctic Ocean. Before then, it had been somewhere in the Pacific where the ocean was large enough and open enough to cause no severe snow storms on land areas (land areas not being close enough to the Pole) and such a large, open ocean would never freeze over anyway. (This suggestion of shifting poles is the really startling part of the theory, but there have been other such suggestions recently and I may go into that in a future article.)

Ice Ages could continue to annoy us periodically, then, until the present mountains wear down

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to nubs and the ocean bottoms rise, or until the North Pole leaves the Arctic (depending on which theory—if either—is correct).

Unless, that is, something new interferes, such as the carbon dioxide we are pouring into the atmosphere, which is radically hastening the current temperature rise. The next temperature drop may be correspondingly slowed, and may, conceivably, not drop far enough to start a new glaciation.

Therefore, it is possible that Earth has seen its last Ice Age, regardless of the Milankovich cycle or the position of the North Pole—until such time as the ocean, or we ourselves, get rid of the excess carbon dioxide once again. Within a matter of centuries, then, we may reverse much or all of 80,000,000 years of dropping temperature and find ourselves back in the Mesozoic, climatically speaking, only without (thank goodness) the dinosaurs.

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By the winner of last year's Hugo for the best science fiction story, and concerning a pile of beans, a cold winter, "Wrestling's Greatest Mystery," a trip by water, and

The Woman Who Thought She Could Read

by Avram Davidson

ABOUT A HUNDRED YEARS AGO A man named Vanderhorn built the little house. He built it one and a half stories high, with attached and detached sheds snuggling around it like usual; and he covered it with clapboards cut at his own mill—he had a small sawmill down at the creek, Mr. Vanderhorn did. After that he lived in the little house with his daughter and her husband (being a widower-man) and one day he died there.

So the daughter and son-in-law, a Mr. Hooten or Wooten or whatever it was, they got into his money which he made out of musket stocks for the Civil War, and they built a big new house next to the old one, only further back from the street. This Mr. Wooten or Hooten or something like that, *he* didn't have any sons, either; and *his* son-in-law turned the sawmill into a buggy factory. Well, you know what happened to *that* business! Finally, a man named Carmichael, who made milk-wagons and baggage-carts and pie-wagons, he bought the whole Vandenhorn estate. He fixed up the big house and put in apartments, and finally he sold it to my father and went out of business. Moved away somewheres.

I was just a little boy when we moved in. My sister was a lot older. The *old* Vandenhorn house wasn't part of the property anymore. A lady named Mrs. Grummick was living there, and Mr. Carmichael had sold her all the property the width of her house from the street on back to the next lot, which faced the street behind ours. I heard my father

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say it was one of the narrowest lots in the city, and it was separated from ours by a picket fence. In the front of the old house was an old weeping willow and a big lilac bush like a small tree. In back was a truck-garden and a few flower beds. Mrs. Grummick's house was so near to our property that I could look right into her window, and one day I did, and she was sorting beans.

Mrs. Grummick looked out and smiled at me, she had one of those broad faces with high cheekbones, and when she smiled her little bright black eyes almost disappeared.

"Little boy, hello!" she said. I said Hello and went right on staring, and she went right on sorting her beans. On her head was a kerchief (you got to remember that this was before they became fashionable) and there was a tiny gold ear-ring in each plump ear-lobe. The beans were in two crocks on the table and in a pile in front of her. She was moving them around and sorting them into little groups. There were more crocks on the shelves, and glass jars, and bundles of herbs and strings of onions and peppers and bunches of garlic all hanging around the room. I looked through the room and out the window facing the street and there was a sign in front of the little house, hanging on a sort of one-arm gallows. *Anastasia Grummick, Midwife,* it said.

"What's a midwife?" I asked her.

"Me," she said. And she went on pushing the beans around, lining them up in rows, taking some from one place and putting them in another.

"Have you got any children, Mrs. Grummick?"

"One. I god one boy. *Big* boy." She laughed.

"Where is he?"

"I think he come home today. I *know* he come home today." Her head bobbed.

"How do you know?"

"I know because I know. He come home and I make a bean soup for him. You want go errand for me?"

"All right." She stood up and pulled a little change purse out of her apron pocket, and counted out some money and handed it to me out of the window.

"Tell butcher Mrs. Grummick want him to cod some meat for a bean soup. He knows. Mr. Schloutz. And you ged iche-cream comb with nickel, for you."

I started to go, but she gave me another nickel. "Ged *two* iche-cream combs. I ead one, too." She laughed. "One, too. One, two, three — oh, Englisht languish!" Then she went back to the table, put part of the beans back in the crocks, and swept the rest of them

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into her apron. I got the meat for her and ate my French Vanilla and then went off to play.

A few hours later a taxicab stopped in front of the little grey house and a man got out of it. A big fellow. Of course, to a kid, all grown-ups are real big, but he was *very* big—tremendous he was across, but not so tall. Mrs. Grummick came to the door.

"Eddie!" she said. And they hugged and kissed, so I decided this was her son, even before he called her "Mom."

"Mom," he said, "do I smell bean soup?"

"Just for you I make it," she said. He laughed.

"You knew I was coming, huh? You been reading them old beans again, Mom?" And they went into the house together.

I went home, thinking. My mother was doing something over the washtub with a ball of blueing. "Mama," I said, "can a person read beans?"

"Did you take your Milk of Magnesia?" my mother asked. Just like I hadn't spoken. "Did you?"

I decided to bluff it out. "Uh-huh," I said.

"Oh *no* you didn't. Get me a spoon."

"Well, why do you ask, if you ain't going to believe me?"

"Open up," she ordered. "More. Swallow it. Take the rest. All of it. If you could see your face. Suppose it froze and stayed like that? Go and wash the spoon off."

Next morning Eddie was down in the far end of the garden with a hoe. He had his shirt off. Talk about shoulders! Talk about arms! Talk about a chest! My mother was out in front of our house, which made her near Eddie's mother out in back of hers. Of course my mother had to know everybody's business.

"That your son, Mrs. Grummick?"

"My son, yes."

"What does he do for a living?"

"Rachel."

"No, I mean your *son* . . . what does he do . . ."

"He rachel. All over country. I show you."

She showed us a picture of a man in trunks and with a hood over his head. "The Masked Marvel! Wrestling's Greatest Mystery!" The shoulders, arms, and chest—they could only have been Eddie's. There were other pictures of him in bulging poses, with names like, oh, the Slav Slayer, Chief Thunderwing, Young Kehoe, and so on. Every month Eddie Grummick sent his mother another photograph. It was the only kind of letter he sent because she didn't know how to read English. Or any other language, for that matter.

Back in the vegetable patch Eddie started singing a very pop-

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ular song at that time, called "I Faw Down And Go *Boom!*"

It was a hot summer that year, a long hot summer, and September was just as hot as July. One shimmering, blazing day Mrs. Grummick called my father over. He had his shirt off, was sitting under our tree in his BVD top, and we were drinking lemonade.

"When I was a kid," he said, "we used to make lemonade with brown sugar and sell it in the streets. We used to call out:

'Brown Lemonade
Mixed in the shade
Stirred by an old maid.'

People used to think that was pretty funny."

Mrs. Grummick called out: "Hoo-hoo! Mister! Hoo-hoo!"

"Guess she wants *me,*" my father said. He went across the lawn. "Yes *mam* . . ." he was saying. "Yes *mam* . . . *Yes* mam?"

She asked, "You buy coal yed, Mister?"

"*Coal?* Why, no-o-o . . . not *yet.* Looks like a pretty mild winter ahead, wouldn't you say?"

She pressed her lips together and closed her eyes and shook her head. "No! Bedder you buy soon coal. Lotch coal. Comes very soon bad wedder. Bad!"

My father scratched his head. "Why, you sound pretty certain, Mrs. Grummick, but-uh—"

"I *know,* Mister. If I say id, if I tell you, I *know.*"

Then I piped up and asked, "Did you read it in the beans, Mrs. Grummick?"

"Hey!" She looked at me, surprised. "How you know, liddle boy?"

My father said, "You mean, you can tell a bad winter is coming from the *beans?*"

"Iss true. I know. I read id."

"*Well,* now—that's very interesting. Where I come from, used to be a man—a weather prophet, they called him—*he* used to predick the weather by studying skunk stripes. Said his grandfather'd learned it from the Indians. How wide this year, how wide last year. Never failed. So you use beans?"

So I pushed my oar in and I said, "I guess you don't have the kind of beans that the man gave Jack for the cow and he planted them and they were all different colors, well, a bean stalk grew way up and he climbed—"

Father said, "Now don't bother Mrs. Grummick, sonny," but she leaned over the fence and picked me up and set me down on her side of it.

"You, liddle boy, come in house and tell me. You, Mister: buy coal."

Mrs. Grummick gave me a glass of milk from the nanny-goat who lived in one of the sheds, and a piece of gingerbread, and I told

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her the story of Jack and the beanstalk. Here's a funny thing. She believed it. I'm sure she did. It wasn't even what the kids call Making Believe, it was just a pure and simple belief. Then she told *me* a story. This happened on the other side, in some backwoods section of Europe where she came from. In this place they used to teach the boys to read, but not the girls. Figured, what did they need it for? So one day there was this little girl, her brothers were all off in school and she was left at home sorting beans. She was supposed to pick out all the bad beans and the worms, and the more she thought about it and about everything, she began to cry.

Suddenly the little girl looked up and there was this old woman. She asked the kid how come she was crying. Because all the boys can learn to read, but not me, she said. Is *that* all? the old lady asked.

Don't cry, she said. *I'll* teach you how to read, only not in books, the old lady said. Let the *men* read books, books are new things, people could read before there were books. Books tell you what *was,* but you'll be able to tell what's *going* to be. And this old lady taught the little girl how to read the beans instead of the books . . . And I kind of have a notion that Mrs. Grummick said something about how they once used to read *bones,* but maybe it was just her accent and she only meant beans . . .

. . . and you know, it's a funny thing, but, now, if you look at dried beans, you'll notice how each one is maybe a little different shape or maybe the wrinkles are a little different, but I was thinking that, after all, an "A" is an "A" even if it's big or small or twisted or . . .

But that was the story Mrs. Grummick told me. So it isn't remarkable, if she could believe *that* story, she could easily believe the Jack and the Beanstalk one. But the funny thing was, all that hot weather just vanished one day suddenly, and from October until almost April we had what you might call an iron-bound winter. Terrible blizzards one right after another. The rivers were frozen and the canals were frozen and even the railroads weren't running and the roads were blocked more than they were open. And coal? Why, you just couldn't *get* coal. People were freezing to death right and left. But Mrs. Grummick's little house was always warm and it smelled real nice with all those herbs and dried flowers and stuff hanging around in it.

A few years later my sister got married. And after that, in the summer-time, she and her husband Jim used to come back and

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visit with us. I and Jim used to play ball and we had a fine time —they not having any children, they made much of me. I'll always remember those happy summers.

Well, you know, each summer, a few of the churches used to get together and charter a boat and run an excursion. All the young couples used to go, but my sister always made some excuse. See, she was always afraid of the water. This particular summer the same thing happened, but her friends urged her to come. My brother-in-law, he didn't care one way or the other. And then, with all the joking, someone said, Let's ask Mrs. Grummick to read it in the beans for us. It had gotten known, you see. Everybody laughed, and more for the fun of it than anything else, I suppose, they went over and spoke to her. She said that Sister and Jim could come inside, but there wasn't room for anybody else. So we watched through the window.

Mrs. Grummick spread her beans on the table and began to shove them around here and there with her fingers. Some she put to one side and the rest she little by little lined them up in rows. Then she took from one row and added to another row and changed some around from one spot to another. And meanwhile, mind you, she was muttering to herself, for all the world like one of these old people who reads by putting his finger on each word and mumbling it. And what was the answer?

"Don't go by the water."

And that was all. Well, like I say, my sister was just looking for any excuse at all, and Jim didn't care. So the day of the excursion they went off on a picnic by car. I'd liked to have gone, but I guess they sort of wanted to be by themselves a bit and Jim gave me a quarter and I went to the movies and later I bought ice-cream and soda.

I came out and the first thing I saw a boy my own age by the name of Bill Baumgardner and he was running down the street and crying. His shirt was out and he kept up a grinding kind of howl. I called to him but he paid no attention. I still don't know where he was running from or where to and I guess maybe he didn't know either. Because he'd been told, by some old fool who should've known better, that the excursion boat had caught on fire, with his parents on it. The news swept through town and almost everybody with folks on the boat was soon in as bad a state as poor Billy.

First they said everybody was burned or drowned or trampled. Later on it turned out to be not that bad—but it was bad enough.

Oh, my folks were shook up, sure enough, but it's easier to be calm when you know it's not

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your own flesh and blood. I recall hearing the church clock striking six and my mother said, "I'll never laugh at Mrs. Grummick again as long as I live."

Almost everyone who had people on the boat went up the river to where it had finally been run ashore, or else they waited by the police station for news. There was a deaf lady in our street, I guess her daughter got tired of it being so dull at home and she'd lied to her mother, told her she was going riding in the country with a friend. So when the policeman came and told her—shouted at her that they'd pulled out the girl's body, she didn't know what he was talking about. And when she finally understood she began to scream and scream and scream.

The policeman came towards us and my mother said, "I'd better get over there," and she started out. He was just a young policeman and his face was pale. He held up his hand and shook his head. Mother stopped and he came over. I could hear how hard he was breathing. Then he mentioned Jim's name.

"Oh, no," my mother said, very quickly. "They didn't *go* on the boat." He started to say something and she interrupted him and said, "But I tell you, they didn't *go*—" and she looked around, kind of frantically, as if wishing someone would come and send him away.

But no one did. We had to hear him out. It was Sister and Jim, all right. A big truck had gotten out of control ("—but they didn't go on the *boat*," my mother kept repeating, kind of stupidly. "They had this warning and so—") and smashed into their car. It fell off the road into the canal. The police were called right away and they came and pulled it out ("Oh, *oh!* Then they're all *right!*" my mother cried. *Then* she was willing to understand.) But they weren't all right. They'd been drowned.

So we forgot about the deaf lady because my mother, poor thing, *she* got hysterical. My father and the policeman helped her inside and after a while she just lay there on the couch, kind of moaning. The door opened and in tiptoed Mrs. Grummick. She had her lower lip tucked in under her upper teeth and her eyes were wide and she was kind of rocking her head from side to side. In each hand she held a little bottle —smelling-salts, maybe, and some kind of cordial. I was glad to see her and I think my father was. I *know* the policeman was, because he blew out his cheeks, nodded very quickly to my father, and went away.

Mother said, in a weak, thin voice: "They didn't go on the boat. They didn't go because they had just had a warning. That's why—"

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Then she saw Mrs. Grummick and the color came back to her face and she leaped off the couch and she tried to hit Mrs. Grummick and she yelled at her in a hoarse voice I'd never heard and she called her names—the kind of names I was just beginning to find out what they meant and I was, I think, almost as shocked and stunned to hear my mother use them as I was at the news that Sister and Jim were dead.

Well, my father threw his arms around her and kept her from reaching Mrs. Grummick and I remember I grabbed hold of one hand and how it tried to get away from me.

"You *knew!*" my mother shouted, struggling, her hair coming loose. "*You* knew! You *read* it there, you witch! And you didn't tell! You didn't tell! She'd be *alive,* now, if she'd gone on the boat—they weren't all killed, on the boat—but you didn't say a *word!*"

Mrs. Grummick's mouth opened and she started to speak, she was so mixed-up, I guess, that she spoke in her own language, and my mother screamed at her.

My father turned his head around and said, "You'd better get out."

She made a funny kind of noise in her throat. Then she said, "But, Lady—Mister—no—I tell you only what I see—I read there, '*Don't go by the water.*' I only can say what I see in front of me, only what I read. Nothing else. Maybe it mean one thing or maybe another. I only can *read* it. Please—Lady—"

But we knew we'd lost them and it was because of her.

"They ask me," Mrs. Grummick said. "They *ask* me to read—"

My mother kind of collapsed, sobbing. Father said, "Just get out of here. Just turn around and get out."

I heard a kid's voice saying, high, and kind of trembling, "We don't want you here, you old witch! *We hate you!*"

Well, it was *my* voice. And then her shoulders sagged and she looked for the first time like a real old woman. She turned around and shuffled away. At the door she stopped and half-faced us. "I read no more," she said. "I never read more. Better not to know at all." And she went out.

Not long after the funeral we woke up one morning and the little house next door was empty. We never heard where they went and it's only now that I begin to wonder about it and to think of them once again.

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Winner of last year's Hugo for the best science fiction novel, Fritz Leiber has a rich and various talent which makes it ridiculous to try to predict what he will produce next, and certain that you will enjoy it. The present novelet is a case in point: It's actionful and thoughtful, hilarious and saddening, sexy and prudish—and altogether delightful....

THE SILVER EGGHEADS

by Fritz Leiber

FATHER: There you are, Son. Look up at it—but you don't have to lean over backwards that far.

SON: It's big, Daddy.

FATHER: Yes, it's big all right. That's a wordmill, Son, a machine that writes fiction books.

SON: Is it a robot, Daddy?

FATHER: No, it's not a robot, like the electrician or your teacher, though it too is made of metal and works by electricity. A wordmill is like an electric computing machine, except it handles words, not numbers. It's like the big chess-playing war-making machine, except it makes its moves in a novel instead of a game. But a wordmill is not alive like a robot and it cannot move around. It can only write fiction books.

SON: (*kicking it*) Dumb old machine!

FATHER: Don't do that, Son. Now it's like this—there are any number of ways to tell a story.

SON: (*still kicking it*) Yes, Daddy.

FATHER: The ways depend on the words that are chosen. But once one word is chosen, the others must fit with it. They must carry the same mood or atmosphere (I'll explain that later).

SON: Yes, Daddy.

FATHER: A wordmill is fed the general pattern for a story and it goes to its big big memory bank —much bigger than even Daddy's —and picks the first word at random. But when it picks the second word it must pick one that has the same atmosphere, and so on, and so on. Of course it is much much more complicated than that, much too complicated

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for Son to understand, but that is the way it works.

SON: A wordmill keeps telling one story with different words?

FATHER: Well, in a way, yes.

SON: Sounds dumb to me.

FATHER: It is not dumb, Son. All grown-ups read novels. Daddy reads novels.

SON: Yes, Daddy. Who's that?

FATHER: Where?

SON: Coming this way. The lady with no top front in her dress.

FATHER: Ahem! Look away, Son. That's a writer, Son.

SON: (*still looking*) What's a writer, Daddy?

FATHER: A writer is a person who takes care of a wordmill, who dusts it and so on. Writers are allowed to dress and behave in uncouth ways, like gypsies—it's all part of a union agreement that goes back to the time when wordmills were invented. Now you won't believe—

SON: She's putting something in the wordmill, Daddy.

FATHER: (*not looking*) She's oiling it or replacing a tube or doing whatever she's supposed to be doing to this wordmill. Now you won't believe what Daddy's going to tell you now, except that it's Daddy telling you. Before wordmills were invented—

SON: It's smoking, Daddy.

FATHER: (*still not looking*) Don't interrupt, she probably spilled the oil or something. Before wordmills were invented, writers actually wrote stories! They had to hunt—

SON: The writer's running away, Daddy.

FATHER: Don't interrupt. They had to hunt through their memories for every word in a story. It must have been—

SON: It's still smoking, Daddy. There are sparks.

FATHER: Don't interrupt. It must have been dreadfully hard work, like building the pyramids.

SON: Yes, Daddy. It's still—

BOOM!

Father and son pass permanently out of our narrative at this point, and out of existence as well, chance victims of a strange social revolt. The incident in which they perished was one of many and it was being repeated at a large number of nearby places, fortunately without further fatalities.

All along Reading Row, which some call Dream Street, the writers were wrecking the wordmills. Rushing torrentially down the central avenue of Earth's proudest, and in fact the Solar System's *only* publishing center, a giddy, gaudy mob in their berets and bathrobes, togas and ruffs, kimonos, capes, sport shirts, flowing black bow-ties, lace shirtfronts and top-hats, doublets and hose, T-shirts and levis, they burst murderously into each fiction fac-

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tory, screaming death and destruction to the gigantic machines—the machine whose mere tenders they had become, the machines which ground out in their electronic maws the reading material which fed the yearnings and sweetened the unconscious minds of the inhabitants of three planets, a half-dozen moons, and several thousand satellites and spaceships in orbit and trajectory.

No longer content with only the trappings of authorship—the ancient costumes that were the vestments of their profession, the tradition-freighted names they were allowed to assume, the exotic love-lives they were permitted to pursue—the writers smashed and sabotaged, rioted and ruined, while the police of a Union Labor Administration, intent on breaking the power of the publishers, stood complacently aside.

Homer Hemingway axed through the sedate gray control panel of a Random House Write-All and went fiercely to work on the tubes and transistors.

Sappho Wollstonecraft Shaw shoved a large plastic funnel into the memory unit of a Scribner Scribe and poured two gallons of smoking nitric acid into its indescribably delicate innards.

Harriet Beecher Bronte drenched a Norton Novelist with gasoline and whinnied as the flames shot skyward.

Somerset Makepeace Dickens sledgehammered a Harcourt Hack.

Heloise Ibsen, her gown torn from her shoulders and waving a black flag with an ominous white "30" on it, signifying the end of machine-made literature, leaped atop three cowering vice-presidents (who had come down "to watch the robots scatter those insolent grease-monkeys); for a moment she looked strikingly like "Liberty Leading the People" in Delacroix's painting.

Abelard de Musset, top-hat awry and pockets bulging with proclamations of self-expression and creativity, leveled a submachinegun at a Putnam Plotter. Marcel Feodor Joyce lobbed a grenade into the associator of a Schuster Serious. Dylan Bysshe Donne bazzokaed a Bantam Bard.

Agatha Ngaio Sayers poisoned a Doubleday 'Dunnit with powdered magnetic oxide.

H. G. Heinlein planted shaped charges on an Appleton S-F and almost lost his life pushing the rest of the mob back to a safe distance until the fiery white jets had stabbed through the involuted leagues of fine silver wiring.

Edgar Allen Bloch, brandishing an electric cane fearfully powered by portable isotopic batteries, all by himself shorted out forever a whole floorful of assorted cutters, padders, polishers, tighteners, juicers, and hesaid-shesaids.

When the last Harper Editor

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was gutted, the last Viking Anthologizer reduced to a blackened shell plastered with manifestos, when in short the last wordmill was a smoking ruin, the victory-flushed writers trooped back to their various bohemian barracks, their Latin and French Quarters, their Bloomsburies and Greenwich Villages, and sat down in happy circles to await inspiration.

None came.

Minutes stretched to hours, hours toward days. Tank-cars of coffee were brewed and sipped, mountains of cigarette butts accumulated on black-enameled slanting floors, but the great epics of the future—even the humble work-a-day sex stories and space sagas—remained singularly elusive.

It was discovered in passing that many of the writers could not make words at all or arrange them on paper in any pattern; in this great era of pictorial-auditory education. they had missed the special classes in that somewhat archaic art. Of these non-writers, some purchased dictating devices, but a large minority awoke to the sick realization that even their mastery of the spoken word extended no further than Simplified Basic or Solar Pidgin.

After seventeen hours, Lafcadio Cervantes Proust slowly wrote, "Swerving, skimming, evermore turning, mounting higher and higher in ever-widening fiery circles . . ." and then stopped.

Gertrude Colette Sand painstakingly printed, "Yes, yes, yes, *yes*, YES!' she said."

Wolfgang Friedrich von Wassermann put down, "Once upon a time . . ."

Nothing more.

Meanwhile the Quartermaster General of the Space Marines commanded the PX on the planet Pluto to ration paperbacks and listen-tapes; it looked, he radioed, as if the next fiction shipment would comprise normal reading for only three months instead of four years.

Deliveries of new titles to Terran newsstands were cut fifty and then ninety percent to conserve the miserably tiny stock of written and printed but undistributed novels. Book-a-day housewives phoned mayors and congressmen. Prime ministers, used to putting themselves to sleep with a detective story a night, viewed developments with inward panic. A 13-year-old boy committed suicide "because adventure stories are my only pleasure and now there will be no more."

TV programs and movies-in-depth had to be curtailed in the same proportion as books, since they depended on the same vastly expensive wordmills for their scripts and scenarios. The world's newest entertainment device, the All-Senses-Poem-of-Ecstacy ma-

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chine, already in limited production, was similarly affected.

Electronic scientists and cybernetic engineers issued confidential preliminary reports that it would take from ten to fourteen months to get one wordmill working, with dark hints that their secondary surveys might be even more pessimistic.

Earth's smug Union Government awakened to a belated realization that the Solar System's relatively smooth-running society would soon begin to sour and sicken, from the subconscious outward, for lack of fresh fictional entertainment.

The Government appealed to publishers, the publishers to the writers.

The writers returned to their cross-legged circles, locked hands, stared across at each other's pale masks, and concentrated more intensely than before.

Nothing.

At the far end of Reading Row, well beyond the point where Dream Street changes its name to Nightmare Alley, stands Rocket House, pronounced Racket House by the cognoscenti.

Gaspard De La Nuit, familiarly Gaspard the Nut, painfully mounted the stalled escalator leading to the executive area. His long wavy hair, at the moment disordered, and his black velvet smoking jacket, torn halfway down the back, proclaimed him a writer. His soot-blackened hands, a large blue bruise over his left eye and a bloody smear down his right cheek showed that he had been closely involved in the recent insurrection. His expression was one of dejection, smoldering moodiness, and self-contempt.

Behind him tramped a well-built robot finished in blued steel and a little on the stocky side. Between them they carried a stretcher on which reposed a slenderer, fairer robot, finished in aluminum anodized a deep pink, now darkly scorched down one side.

Gaspard stopped in front of a simple door bearing the name "FLAXMAN" and below it "CULLINGHAM," and he doubled up his knee and pressed a waist-high button. When nothing happened immediately he gave the door a savage kick. It swung open, revealing a large office furnished with luxurious simplicity. Behind a double desk that was like two half moons joined—a sort of Cupid's-bow effect—sat a short dark man with the broad grin of energetic efficiency and a tall fair man with the faint smile of weary efficiency. They seemed to have been enjoying a quiet conversation together. They looked around with some surprise but no annoyance.

Gaspard stepped inside without

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a word and he and the robot gently lowered the stretcher to the floor.

"You'll be able to take care of her now, Zane?" he asked.

The robot, his finger probing a wall socket, nodded. "There's electricity in this area," he replied. "That's all I need."

Gaspard walked up to the double desk and planted both hands on it.

"Well?" he said in no friendly voice.

"Well what, Gaspard?" the short dark man asked with a little laugh that wasn't at all uneasy.

"I mean, where were you when they wrecked your wordmills?" Gaspard slammed the desk with his fist. "Look here, Mr. Flaxman. You—and Mr. Cullingham here—*are* Rocket House. To me that means more than ownership, or even mastery—it means responsibility, loyalty. Why weren't you down there fighting to save your machines? Why did you leave it to me and one true robot?"

Q. H. Flaxman again made with the innocent laugh. "Why, were you there—Gaspard, on our side, I mean? Nice of you and all that, but you seem to have been acting against the best interests of your profession."

"Profession!" Gaspard made the noise of spitting without actually doing so. "Honestly, Mr. Flaxman, I don't see why you dignify it with that name or act so blasted magnanimous to the jumped-up little rats!"

"Tut-tut, Gaspard, where's your own loyalty? I mean of long-hair to long-hair."

Gaspard savagely rammed his own hair back off his forehead. "Lay off, Mr. Flaxman. Oh, I wear it that way, all right, just as I wear this Italian monkey-suit, because it's part of the job and a writer's got to do it, just as I've changed my name to Gaspard De La Noo-ee. But I'm not fooled by any of this junk. I don't believe I'm any flaming literary genius. I'm a freak, I guess, a traitor to my union if you like. Maybe you know they call me Gaspard the Nut. Well, that's the way I like it, because basically I'm just a nuts-and-boltsman, a better-than-average wordmill mechanic and nothing more."

He paused and his voice steadied. "But get this, Mr. Flaxman, I really loved wordmills. I enjoyed their product—sure—but I *loved* the machines themselves. Why, Mr. Flaxman, did you actually ever realize—deep down in your guts—that each wordmill was unique, an immortal Shakespeare, and that's why there hasn't been a new one built in over sixty years? I wonder how many people realize that? Well, they'll find out soon enough, when they try to build a wordmill from scratch without a single living man who understands the creat-

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ive side of the problem—a real writer, I mean. This morning there were five hundred word-mills on Reading Row, now there's not one in the whole Solar System. Three might have been saved, but you were scared for your own hides! Five hundred Shakespeares were murdered while you sat there chatting. Five hundred deathless literary geniuses, unique and absolutely self-sufficient—"

He broke off because the tall man had emitted a little chuckle, as unguilty as Flaxman's, though not as robust.

"Not quite self-sufficient, Gaspard," said the quieter half of Rocket House, "not quite. Men built the wordmills, men also directed them, just as ancient writers had to direct the activities of their own subconscious minds—usually in a most inefficient fashion of course. The two activities involved in writing are the unconscious churning or proliferation and the inspired direction—the programming in the case of a wordmill. Now these two activities are completely separate in my opinion and it's best when they are carried out by two distinct organisms or mechanisms. Actually the name of the directive genius (never a writer in these days, of course) ought always to have appeared on each paperback or listen-tape alongside the name of the originating wordmill . . . But I'm riding my hobby away from my point, which is simply that a man is always the ultimate directive force."

"Maybe, Mr. Cullingham," Gaspard said unwillingly. "And you were an ace programmer, all right. But I always thought Whittlesey Wordmaster 4 once wrote three serious best-selling novels and a science-fiction romance without any programming at all. Maybe you'll tell me, that's just promotion copy, but I'll believe it when it's proved to me." The bitter tone returned to his voice. "Just as I'll believe that my fellow monkeys can actually write books when I turn the pages and two consecutive ones hold my interest. They've been talking big for months now but . . . well, I'll wait 'til the juice starts to flow through their daisy-rings and the words start coming."

"Which reminds me," Flaxman interjected, "you were going to tell us about the fracas downstairs. Give with some details. How was it?"

Gaspard looked back and forth between the two partners with deep and puzzled suspicion. Then he shrugged his shoulders and continued, at first in the same blank tones.

"Rough, Mr. Flaxman and Mr. Cullingham. Very rough. Actually, I have my doubts if even the police and the hard goons working together could have stopped

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them today. They were crazy, writer-crazy, and you know what that means. Zane fought like the angel Michael, but they simply rolled over the two of us."

"Ah!" Flaxman observed with an interested grin.

Gaspard's scowl deepened. After a bit he resumed. "Here they mostly used flame-throwers. It was murder, ghastly murder. You know the one we called Ficky? —it was just an old, rebuilt Farrar Fictioneer, but somehow it was my favorite, I never missed a book it milled—well, I had to lie there on the floor with a couple of harpies stamping on me as a scab, and watch old Fickie blacken and warp and frizzle. My own girl was on the flame-thrower, too. My own girl, Mr. Flaxman—"

"Tch-tch. His own girl," Flaxman said, managing to sound solicitous and amused at the same time.

Gaspard nodded. "Heloise Ibsen, she calls herself. We meshed pretty well for a while. Not that it means anything to me any more. Or to her either, I'm sure. She made that very clear," he added, gingerly fingering the four gouges coming down from his right temple. "Well, that's about all. They got all three wordmills and every secondard in the place —they were so blood-drunk they even attacked a robot they had a grudge against. Zane rescued her but she was pretty badly mauled. It was Miss Blushes."

G. K. Cullingham looked at his partner inquiringly.

"The pink one they carried in," Flaxman explained. "Our visiting breen, the new Government censoring robot." He shook his head, grinning widely. "So now we got a censor and no scripts for her to blue-pencil. Can you top that for irony? It's a screwy business, all right—that's the naked truth. I thought you knew Miss Blushes, Cully."

At that moment a high sweet voice behind them broke in, strident yet dreamy. It said, "For 'can' print 'refresher.' Delete 'screwy' and close. Question naked sequence. For 'knew' substitute 'were acquainted with.' Oh my, where am I? And what have I been saying? I must be confused."

The pink aluminum robot was sitting up and groping about uncertainly. The big blued-steel robot was kneeling at her side and tenderly mopping her scorched flank with a damp pad—the ugly discoloration was already fading. He tucked the pad in a little door in his chest and supported her with an arm.

"You must be calm," he said. "Everything's going to be all right. You're with friends."

"Am I? How can I be sure?" She drew away from him, felt of herself and hastily closed several

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little doors. "Why, you've been doing things to me! I've been lying here exposed. Those humans have seen me with my sockets open!"

"It was necessary," Zane assured her. "You needed electricity and other attentions. You've had a rough time."

"Believe me, Miss," Gaspard volunteered, "we haven't been looking at you. We've been busy."

Miss Blushes gave a skeptical whir.

The other robot stood up. "Rest now," he said in a voice of calm authority, and came toward the desk.

"Well Zane, I hear you were quite a hero," Flaxman greeted him genially. The small dark man's face sobered sub-momentarily. "A shocking experience though. It must have been harder on you than on Gaspard have to watch your brother machines being lynched, as it were."

"Frankly, no, Mr. Flaxman," the robot replied without hesitation. "The truth is that I don't like wordmills or any other thinking machines that are all brain and no body, unable to move about. They have no consciousness, just blind creativity. They're monstrous, they scare me. You call them my brothers, but to me they're unrobot."

"That's odd, when you're a robot author yourself."

"Please, Mr. Flaxman! Not a robot author, which sounds too much as if I were some sort of walking wordmill, but a robots' author—I do wish you'd remember to say it my way. It is true that as Zane Gort I have authored a series of adventure tales which you have published, but they are strictly stories for robots, written by a robot, but in no sense robot-written, if you follow me." He looked at Cullingham. "I mean there was no programming, no human direction whatever, such as you, sir, provided for Rocket's wordmills. Which is natural enough, of course, since my stories have been strictly for a robot audience with robot feelings and attitudes. Up until now, that is." He paused, looking around. "Now, of course, the situation is somewhat different. I mean now that your wordmills are all destroyed and your human writers an uncertain quantity, and we robots' authors are the only experienced fiction writers left in the Solar System . . ."

"Ah yes, the wordmills destroyed!" Flaxman said with a big grin at Cullingham, rubbing his hands.

"I would be quite ready to accept the direction of Mr. Cullingham where human feelings are involved," the robot went on quickly, "and to have his name appear alongside mine, same type size. 'By Zane Gort and G. K. Cullingham' . . . it sounds right."

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"Now wait a minute, all of you!" Gaspard's command was a roar. The writer looked around like an angry bear. "Look here, Mr. F. and Mr. C., every time someone mentions wordmills getting destroyed, you act like you're sitting down to Christmas dinner. Honestly, if I didn't know that your own wordmills had been wrecked with the rest, I'd swear that you two crooks had engineered the whole smash-up along Reading Row. Tell me, *were* you in on it somehow?"

Flaxman rocked back, grinning. "We sympathized, Gaspard. Yes, we sympathized with you writers and your injured egos and thwarted urges toward self-expression. No active aid of course, but . . . we sympathized."

"With a bunch of screaming long-hairs?" Gaspard jerked a beautifully mellowed meerschaum pipe from a pocket of his smoking jacket and started to thumb tobacco into it from a sleek sealskin pouch. Then he saw what he was doing and hurled them to the floor. "The hell with atmosphere anymore!" he said, reaching his hand across the desk. "Gimme a cigarette!"

Flaxman seemed taken aback, but Cullingham leaned forward and smoothly complied with the request.

"Let's see," Gaspard said, taking a deep drag, "maybe you actually do have in mind this crazy scheme—excuse me, Zane—of having robots' authors write books for humans . . . no, that doesn't explain it, because practically every other fiction factory publishes robots' books and has one or more robots' authors in its stable, all looking for wider fields to conquer . . ."

"There are robots' authors and robots' authors," Zane Gort observed in somewhat injured tones. "Not all of them are so adaptable or resourceful, have such broad sympathies with nonrobot beings—"

"Shut up, I said. No, it has to be something that Rocket has and the other fiction factories haven't. Hidden wordmills? No, I'd have known about those, nobody can fool me there. A secret stable of writers, maybe, trained in advance, who can actually write with something approaching wordmill quality? I'll believe that when robots sprout—excuse me, Miss Blushes. But what then? Extraterrestrials . . . ? Brilliant psychopaths under some kind of direction . . . ?"

Flaxman rocked forward. "Shall we tell him, Cully?"

The tall fair man thought that through aloud. "Gaspard thinks we're two crooks, but he's basically loyal to Rocket House." (Gaspard nodded, scowling.) "We've published every single one of Zane's epics, from *Naked Steel* to *The Creature from the Black Cy-*

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clotron. He twice tried to change publishers . . ." (Zane Gort looked mildly surprised) ". . . and got a definitive brush-off each time. In any case we're going to need help, as we'd already decided, in preparing copy for the printing machines and so on. . . . The answer is yes. Go ahead, Flaxie."

His partner rocked back and let out a deep breath. Then he lifted the phone.

"Get me the Nursery."

He eyed Gaspard smilingly.

"Miss Bishop? I'm in the office. Bring me a brain. . . . No, any brain."

He started to hang up.

"What's that? No, it's perfectly safe, the streets are clear. Well, have Zangwill bring it. All right, you bring it and Zangwill can be your bodyguard. Well, if Zangwill's really that drunk . . ."

As he listened, his gaze went from Gaspard to Zane Gort. When he talked into the phone again it was with his customary decision.

"Okay, here's the way it'll be. I'm sending two guys, flesh and metal—they'll guard you here. . . . Why, they're brave as lions, they practically died defending our wordmills, they're bleeding all over the office. Now look here, no last-minute dithering. I want that brain fast."

He hung up. "She was antsy about the rioters," he explained. He looked at Gaspard. "You know Wisdom of the Ages?"

"Sure, I pass it every day. Real dinky place. No activity."

"What do you figure it for?"

"I don't know. Oh, some occult publishing house, I guess. . . . Hey, wait a minute! The big brass seal downstairs set in the middle of the floor of the lobby! I remember now—it reads 'Rocket House' and then, in smaller Gothic letters with lots of curlecues, 'in association with Wisdom of the Ages.' Say, I never connected those two before."

"Well blow me down," said Flaxman. "A writer with powers of observation! You and Zane get over there now and hustle up Miss Bishop."

Windowless, the room was in darkness except for the glow from a half dozen TV screens placed at what seemed to be random angles. The shifting pictures on the screens were unusually fine, of stars and spaceships, paramecia and people, and just plain printed pages. Much of the central floor space and one wall of the room were occupied by tables on which were the television screens and other objects and cabled instruments. The three other walls were irregularly crowded with small stands of varying height—firm little pillars—on each of which reposed, in a smooth thick black collar, an egg, rather larger than a human head, of soft and cloudy silver.

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It was a strange silver, that. It made one think of mist and moonlight, fine white hair, sterling by candlelight, powder rooms, perfume flasks, a princess' mirror, a Pierrot's mask, a poet-prince's armor.

The room emanated swiftly varying impressions, one moment a weird hatchery, a fairy-tale robots' incubator, a witch-doctor's den of fearful leprous trophies—the next it would seem that the silvery ovoids were the actual heads of some metallic species, leaning together in silent communion.

This last illusion was intensified because near the base of each egg, always the small end, were three dark smudges, two above and one below, suggesting a rudimentary eyes-mouth triangle under a huge smooth forehead. Going nearer, you would see that these were three simple sockets. Many of the sockets were empty, others had electric cords plugged into them leading to instruments. The instruments were a varied lot, but if you studied the arrangement for a time, you would discover that the upper right socket, figuring from the egg's point of view, was never connected to anything but a specimen of compact TV camera; the upper left socket to some sort of microphone; while the mouth socket always led to a small loudspeaker.

There was one exception to this rule: occasionally the mouth socket of one egg would be directly connected to the ear socket (upper left) of another egg. In such cases the complementary connection was always made: mouth's ear to ear's mouth.

Still closer inspection would have shown some very fine lines and smooth dents in the tops of the eggs. The fine lines comprised a large circle with a small circle in the center of it—you might just possibly find yourself thinking of a double fontanel. The placing of the dents suggested that each circular section could be twirled out by finger and thumb.

If you touched one of the silver eggs (but you would have hesitated first) you would for a moment have thought it hot, then realized it was merely not as cool as you expected, that its temperature approached that of human blood. And if you have fingertips sensitive to vibration and had let them rest against the smooth metal for a time, you would have sensed a faint steady beating in the same tempo as the human heart.

A woman in a white smock was resting her left haunch along the edge of one of the tables, her upper body drooping and her head bowed, as if taking a quick rest. It was difficult to tell her age because of the semi-darkness and the white mask covering her face below the eyes. At her side, sup-

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ported by her haunch and a halter-strap, was a large tray, which she also steadied with her left hand. On the tray were a score or so of deep glass dishes filled with some aromatic liquid. In about half of these were submerged thick metal disks threaded around the circumference. They were the same diameter as the smaller fontanels in the silver eggs.

Standing on the table near the woman's bowed head was a microphone. It was plugged into an egg somewhat smaller than the others. A speaker was plugged into the egg's mouth socket.

They began to talk together, the egg in fixed droning tones as if it could control its words and their timing but not their timbre or internal rythm, the woman in a weary croon almost as monotonous.

WOMAN: Go to sleep, go to sleep baby.

EGG: I can't sleep. Haven't slept for a hundred years.

WOMAN: Go into a trance then.

EGG: I can't go into a trance.

WOMAN: You can if you try baby.

EGG: I'll try if you turn me over.

WOMAN: I turned you over yesterday.

EGG: Turn me over, I got cancer.

WOMAN: You can't get cancer baby.

EGG: I can. Plug in my eye and turn it around so I can look at myself.

WOMAN: You just did. Too often's no fun baby. Want to see pictures, want to read?

EGG: No.

WOMAN: Want to talk to someone? Want to talk to Number 4?

EGG: Number 4's stupid.

WOMAN: Want to talk to Number 6?

EGG: No. Let me watch you take a bath.

WOMAN: Not now baby. Got to hurry. Got to feed you brats and run.

EGG: Why?

WOMAN: Business baby.

EGG: No. I know why you got to hurry.

WOMAN: Why baby?

EGG: Got to hurry 'cause you got to die.

WOMAN: Guess I got to die baby.

EGG: I won't die, I'm immortal.

WOMAN: I'm immortal too in church.

EGG: You're not immortal at home though.

WOMAN: No baby.

EGG: I am. Esp me something, come in my mind.

WOMAN: Ain't no esp baby I'm afraid.

EGG: There is. Try. Just try.

WOMAN: Ain't no esp or you brats could do it.

EGG: We're all pickled, we're on ice, but you're out in the wide warm world. Try once more.

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WOMAN: I can't try. I'm too tired.

EGG: You could do it if you tried.

The woman sighed, shaking her head, and stood up. "Look here, Half Pint," she said, "want to watch me feed the others?"

"All right. Plug the eye in my ear though, it's funnier that way."

"No baby, that's nuts."

She plugged a fish-eyed TV camera into his upper right socket, at the same time unplugging his speaker with a quick tug at the cable. Tray hanging balanced at her waist she touched a nearby egg with her fingertips. Her eyes went blank above the mask as she judged the temperature of the metal and timed the beat of the tiny isotope-powered pump built into the larger fontanel.

She fitted finger and thumb of her other hand to the dents in the smaller fontanel and gave it a practiced twirl. It rose slowly, spinning. She caught it just as it came unscrewed and plumped it into one of the unoccupied dishes on her tray, plucking a fresh disk from its dish, settled its threads at the first try on the threads in the hole, gave it a reverse twirl, and was on to the next egg without waiting to watch it spin down flush.

She had twirled into place the last fresh disk on her tray when a sol-sol-do chimed. "Damn!" she said, nevertheless. . . .

Girls are a great institution, reads an entry in the unwritten notebooks of Gaspard De La Nuit. The receptionist who appeared behind the counter at Wisdom of the Ages was as fresh as the cubicle was musty with pentagrams and Isis-crosses. Gaspard, breathing hard, studied her appreciatively and thanked the higher powers that skirts were back again in the non-writing world—properly short, snug skirts. A feathery sweater clung to the middle heights of the petite vision. Zane Gort whistled the polite robot's greeting which all she-humans found most comforting.

When Gaspard's inspection did not terminate, she said sharply, "Yes, yes, but we know all about me. So let's quit the panting and get down to business."

"I've been running," Gaspard asserted abruptly. "A scribe-squad ambushed us and it was five blocks and seven levels before we shook the maniacs."

"Very exciting, I'm sure," the girl replied, looking him and his bruises up and down, "but what's your business? This isn't a first-aid station."

"Look here, kid," Gaspard said, a bit nettled. "Let's quit the mumbo-jumbo and get going. We're behind schedule. Where's that brain?"

It came out in pound-of-hamburger tones and the girl's expression hardened.

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"What brain?" she asked coldly.

"Kid, I've no time for . . . oh . . ." He looked at her again and said, wrinkling his nose, "Get me Miss Bishop."

The girl's eyes slitted without hiding quite all of the violet irises. "Miss Bishop, eh?" she said bitterly.

"Yeah," Gaspard said, "She in your hair, kid?"

"How do you know?"

"I'm intuitive. She's a real old harridan, eh?"

The girl drew herself up. "Brother, you don't know the half of it," she said. "You wait here, I'll get her, if you really think you want her."

"Use a blow-torch on her if she dithers, but don't scorch her paint," Gaspard called after the girl. By the time she returned he had impatiently vaulted over the counter, tried the inner door and started to pound on it off and on, while Zane was deep in a dusty tome he had discovered, entitled *Golems and Other Arcane Automata.*

"Get outside," the girl said sharply. "The black button works the flap in the counter. Go on."

"Okay, okay," Gaspard said, complying, "but what's the idea of all *that?*—Christmas?"

That was two large colorful packages. One was rectangular with wide red-and-green stripes and silver ribbon, the other was ovoid with gold paper marked with large purple dots and tied by a wide purple ribbon with a big bow in it.

"No, Labor Day," she told Gaspard, indicating the ovoid. "Careful, it's heavy."

Gaspard nodded and looked at her with some respect as he received the weight.

"And have your friend take the other."

"Look at this, Gaspard," Zane said excitedly, thrusting the book toward him. "Jewish robots! I never realized that our history—Oh, excuse me. Right away." He took the red-and-green package.

"Now what's *that* for?" Gaspard asked. The girl had drawn a small but wicked-looking handgun. "I get it, you're the bodyguard."

"Nuh-uh," the girl said. "I just walk behind you and when you drop that Easter egg I shoot you in the back of the neck, right in the middle of the medulla oblongata. Don't let it make you nervous, you won't feel a thing."

"Oh, all right, all right," Gaspard said, starting out. "But where's Miss Bishop?"

"That," the girl said, "is for you to figure out, step by step, as you watch for banana skins."

Ropes are ancient tools but eternally useful. Two of them now bound, in picturesque crisscrosses, the partners Cullingham and Flaxman. The former sat silently behind his half of the Cu-

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pid's-bow desk, lashed to his chair, smiling his patient, almost Christlike smile. The latter, behind his half, was silent too, but apparently only because Miss Blushes, standing behind him amid a shambles of ransacked files, had her hand firmly over his mouth.

The pink censoring robot was saying, recitatively, "May a higher power consign to eternal torment all delete-and-wait-for-new-word scriveners. Abuse their odorous integuments. There, isn't that much nicer, Mr. Flaxman, and truly more expressive?"

Miss Bishop, whipping out clippers, stripped the partners' bonds off in a jiffy, while Zane Gort led Miss Blushes aside, saying, "You must excuse her, gentlemen. The ruling passion—censorship in her case—is very strong in we metal folk, and electron storms, such as her mind has suffered, only intensify it. Now, now, dear, I'm not trying to touch your sockets."

Gaspard started to tell about the ambush, but Flaxman cut in. "I know—writers!" he gasped, straightening his nose. "They were here too. Just look! Thank God we don't keep in these offices a scrap of film, paper or tape relating us to the eggheads. Their squad-boss was a busty, bare-shouldered babe in black with a little necklace of silver skulls—"

"Heloise!" Gaspard exclaimed. "Your girl, hey? Well, I don't envy you," the publisher said. "She's a one-woman Gestapo. See here, Gaspard, during your lovey-dovey nights with that cannibal queen have you been telling her things that would make her suspicious of Rocket House? I mean something more specific than telling her we're worse crooks than other publishers?"

"I honestly don't think so, Mr. Flaxman. I—"

"Save it till later. I got to look to our defenses." Flaxman sprang to the phone.

"If you gentlemen can leave off yapping, I'd appreciate some help," Miss Bishop said curtly, hoisting the gold-and-purple package out of Gaspard's arms.

Cullingham, thoughtfully rubbing his long wrists, moved quietly to her aid. She had cleared a large space on the desk and was taking TV eyes, ears and speakers out of the package Zane Gort had carried.

Flaxman hung up and looked around at Gaspard and at Zane Gort, who had managed to appease Miss Blushes.

"Miss Bishop brief you guys on what all this is about?" the publisher asked. They shook their heads. "Good! About a hundred years back, in the last half of the Twentieth Century, there was a virtuoso surgeon and electronics genius named Daniel Zukertort. Those were merely his two showiest abilities—he was also the

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greatest sealed-motors-and-processes technician the world's ever known and—well, unless some of the new stuff they're turning up on Leonardo da Vinci holds water, there never was anybody to match this Zukertort, before or since. He was a magician with the micro-scalpel and he only had to whistle at an electron to make it stop short and wait for orders. He perfected a nerve-to-metal link, an organic-to-inorganic synapse, that no other biotechnician has been able to duplicate, with any consistent success, on the higher animals.

"Now like any man of his ability, Zukertort was a crackpot. Although he called himself a humanitarian, he didn't even care about the stupendous prosthetic benefits—being able, for instance, to give a man an artificial arm or leg with metal nerves grafted to those in the stump.

"All Zukie's interest was aimed at two goals: immortality for the best human minds, and the opportunity for those minds to achieve mystical knowledge by functioning in isolation from the distractions of the world and the flesh.

"Now Zukie had his own ideas about the best human minds. Scientists he didn't give a hoot for, they were all his inferiors. Statesmen and such he only sneered at. Religion he'd been poisoned against in childhood. But mention the word artist and he would go all gooey inside, for Zukie was a very literal-minded Joe, absolutely no imagination outside his specialties. Artistic creation—the merest tune-fingering, paint-smearing, or especially word-juggling—remained a miracle to him to his dying day. So it was clear who were going to have their minds pickled if Zukie had his way: creative artists — painters, sculptors, and composers, but above all, writers.

"Now, he was a very shrewd man about some things—he knew there were going to be some high-power objections to what he was doing, so he went around very quietly organizing the whole thing, and when the story finally did break, he had thirty brains—all writers'—canned. And he folded his arms and flashed his eyes and teeth and dared the world to do its worst.

"It almost did. As you can imagine, there was a horrendous stink. A church, for example, claimed he was denying salvation to mortals, while a branch of the SPCA kept demanding that the brains be instantly put out of their misery.

"Overshadowing all the other complaints, of course, was the one felt by every two-legged Jack and Jill from Earth to Jupiter. Here was immortality on a platter, or in a can—limitations, sure, but immortality just the same, brain tissue being undying. Why

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wasn't it for everybody? It had better be, or else.

"Jurists say there never was a socio-legal issue to match the 'Eggheads Case,' as some newsman dubbed it, for sheer maddening complexity of injunctions, counter-injunctions, fifty-seven varieties of expert testimony, the full treatment. It was hard to get at Zukie, he'd protected himself pretty cleverly. He had superbly complete notarized permissions from all the subjects and every one of his brains backed him up when they were put on the witness stand. He'd also set up a foundation called the Braintrust to care for the brains in perpetuity.

"Then, just on the eve of what looked like the main trial, Zukertort gummed the whole thing up forever.

"He had an assistant who was a whiz. This boy had performed the Psychosomatic Divorce—Zukie's name for the operation—three times with complete success; the last time the maestro had just watched, had not had to prompt once. So Zukie had the operation performed on himself! I guess he figured that once he was safe inside his shell there wasn't a thing the world could do to him and his thirty writers. Maybe he wanted his whack at immortality and mystical enlightenment too, and in any case he believed that he'd passed on his skill to at least one other person.

"Zukie died on the table. His brilliant assistant destroyed all his notes and every scrap of apparatus and killed himself.

"The pandemonium got worse, of course. The vision of immortality-lost simply put too great a strain on society. The world headed for something that has never quite happened before or since, which the socio-boys call universal mutiny.

"Very luckily, the top people concerned with the case—lawyers, medics, government men — were smart, realistic, and devoted. They concocted the story, bolstered it every which way and finally made it stick, that the PSD operation was no good, that every excised brain was reduced to tormented idiocy after a brief period, that the eggheads were no more alive than the bits of chicken heart or Martian muscle the science boys keep pulsing in test tubes for decades. Just brain tissue that wouldn't die but couldn't function. To save themselves from mob fury, the eggheads all backed up the story, of course, by googooing endlessly at attorneys, judges, and TV audiences.

"The crisis over, the problem remained of what to do with the thirty eggheads. Here another amazing figure comes into the story, not a universal genius, but a very remarkable man in many

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ways, a science-fiction publisher in the great tradition of Hugo Gernsback. He was Hobart Flaxman, my ancestor and the founder of Rocket House. He'd been Zukertort's close friend, a staunch supporter both with money and enthusiasm, and Zukie had made him head of the Braintrust. Now he simply stepped in and demanded his rights—custody of the brains—and since he was known as a sound man to several of the top people, it seemed the easiest way out. The Braintrust became Wisdom of the Ages, a name selected for its phoniness, and quietly headed for a sort of educated oblivion.

"Not all his descendants have come up to Old Hobart, but at least they've maintained the trust. The brains have received tender, loving care, and a steady diet of world news and any other information they asked for—very much like a wordmill is constantly fed raw data, come to think of it. There were several times in the early years when a threat arose that the brains would get back in the headlines, but each crisis was successfully surmounted. Today, of course, with the prolonged-lifespan discoveries that are being made, the brains are no longer the menace to public safety that they once were, but we've kept up the policy of secrecy.

"Now you'll be asking me—" (Gaspard came to with a start and realized that Flaxman was shaking a finger at him) "—you'll be asking my why didn't Old Hobart as an imaginative publisher see the potentialities of the egg-heads as fictioneers and encourage them to write and then publish their stuff, under false names, of course, with all precautions. Well, the answer is that wordmills had just come in, they were all the rage, people were sick of writers, they loved the wordmill product, there was no time for a publisher to think of anything else and no point in him doing so.

"But now—" (Flaxman's eyebrows soared happily) "—there are no wordmills, and no writers either, and the thirty brains have a clear field. Just think of it!" He thrust out his palms appealingly. "Thirty writers who've had close to two hundred years apiece to accumulate material and mature their point of view, who are in a position to work steadily day after day without any distractions—no family problems, nothing! I don't have a list of them here and I haven't checked in several years (confidentially, I once had a slight aversion to Wisdom of the Ages—it made me feel creepy, to tell the truth) but do you realize that Ernest Hemingway may be among these brains, or Theodore Sturgeon, or Xavier Hammerberg, or even Jean Cocteau or Bertrand Russell?—those last two lived just long enough to catch the PSD, I

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believe. . . . Hey Miss Bishop, we ready yet?"

"Only for the last ten minutes," she said.

Gaspard and Zane Gort looked around. A large dully-gleaming silver egg rested in its black collar on Cullingham's end of the mighty desk, its various instruments arranged neatly before it, but none of them plugged in as yet.

Flaxman rubbed his hands. "Wait a minute," he said as Miss Bishop reached for the cable of an eye, "I want to be able to introduce it properly. What's its name?"

"This is Number Seven," Miss Bishop said.

"I want the *name*," Flaxman said. "Not some number you use in the Nursery which strikes me as pretty cold-blooded, incidentally."

Miss Bishop thought for a bit. "I sometimes call him Rusty," she said, "because there's a faint streak of something under his collar, and he's the only one that's got it. I was going to bring Half Pint, because he's easiest to carry, but when you sent Mr. Newt I decided on Rusty."

"I mean the *real* name." Flaxman was fighting hard to keep his voice down. "You can't introduce a great literary genius to his future publishers as Rusty."

"Oh." She hesitated, then said decisively, "I'm afraid I can't tell you that."

"*What?*"

"About a year ago," Miss Bishop explained, "the brains decided for reasons of their own that they wanted to become permanently anonymous. So they had me go through the Nursery files and destroy all records on which their names appeared. You may have documents with the names in some safety deposit vault, I suppose, but they wouldn't tell you which name to attach to which cerebral capsule."

"And do you mean to stand there and tell me that you went through with this . . . this act of wanton concealment without consulting me?"

"A year ago you weren't one bit interested in Wisdom of the Ages," she replied with spirit. "And they asked me to."

By this time Flaxman was showing signs of a major eruption and once again Cullingham cut in.

"I'm sure this is a matter we can take up later," said the quieter, smoother half of the partnership. "Perhaps the brains themselves will reverse their policy when they learn that new literary fame is in the offing. Even if they should prefer to maintain strict anonymity, that can be handled easily enough by issuing their works as 'by Brain One and G. K. Cullingham, by Brain Seven and G. K. Cullingham,' and so on."

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"Excuse me," Miss Bishop said, speaking into the echoing silence, "but it's time for Rusty's look-listen, so I'm going to plug him in whether you gentlemen are ready or not."

"We're ready," Cullingham said softly, while Flaxman, rubbing his face, added, "Yeah, I guess we are."

Miss Bishop motioned them all to Flaxman's end of the room, pointing a TV eye in that direction. There was the tiniest *thunk* as she plugged it into the silver egg's upper right-socket, and Gaspard realized that he was shivering. She plugged a microphone into the other top socket, which made Gaspard stop breathing, as he found out some seconds later.

"Go on!" Flaxman said with a funny little gasp. "Plug in . . . er . . . Mr. Rusty's speaker. I feel crawly this way." He caught himself and made a little wave at the eye. "No offense, old chap."

"It might be Miss or Mrs. you know," the girl reminded him. "No, I think it will be best if you make your full proposal and then I plug in his speaker. It will go more smoothly that way, believe me."

"He knew you were bringing him here?"

"Oh yes, I told him."

Flaxman squared his shoulders a little at the eye, swallowed, and then looked around helplessly at Cullingham.

"Hel-lo, Rusty," the partner instantly began, a little too evenly at first, "I am G. K. Cullingham, full partner in Rocket House with Q. H. Flaxman beside me, current custodial director of Wisdom of the Ages." He went on with persuasive clarity to outline the current emergency in the publishing world and the proposal that the brains turn once again to fiction writing. He skirted the question of anonymity, touched lightly on the matter of programming ("customary editorial cooperation"), and described attractive alternate plans for administering royalties, ending with a few nicely-phrased remarks about literary tradition and the great shared enterprise of authorship down the ages.

"I believe that wraps it up, Flaxie."

The small dark publisher nodded, only a trifle convulsively.

Miss Bishop plugged a speaker into the empty socket.

For a good long time there was absolute silence, until Flaxman could bear it no longer and asked throatily, "Miss Bishop, has something gone wrong? Has he died in there? Does it really work?"

"Work, work, work, work, work," the egg instantly said. "That's all I ever do. Think, think, think, think, think. Me-oh-my-oh-my."

"That's his code for a sigh," Miss Bishop explained. "They have speakers on which they can

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make free noises and even sing, but I only let them use them weekends and holidays."

There was another uncomfortable period of silence, then the egg said very rapidly, "Oh, Messers Flaxman and Cullingham, it is an honor, a very great honor, what you suggest, but it is much too grand for us. We have been too much out of touch with things to feel able to tell you incarnated minds how you should entertain yourselves, or presume to provide such entertainment. We thirty discarnates have our little existence together, our little preoccupations and hobbies. It is enough. Incidently, in this I speak for my twenty-nine brothers and sisters as well as myself—we have not disagreed on matters of this sort for the past seventy-five years. So I must thank you kindly, Messers Cullingham and Flaxman, oh very very kindly, but the answer is no. No, no, no, no, no."

Because the voice was an uninflected monotone, it was quite impossible to decide whether its humility was serious or mocking or a combination of the two. However, the egg's loquacity ended Flaxman's fit of shyness, and the two partners began to bombard the egg with sound logic, reassurances, pleas, considerations and the like.

Even Zane Gort put in a well-phrased encouragement now and again.

Gaspard, who said nothing and was thoughtfully drifting toward Miss Bishop, whispered to the robot in passing, "Good going, Zane. I'd have thought you'd find him weird—unrobot, as you put it. After all, he's an immobile thinking machine."

The robot considered that. "No," he whispered back, "he's too small to make me feel that way. Too . . . whir . . . cuddly, you might say. Besides, he's not unrobot or even inrobot, he's arobot. He's human being like you. In a box of course, but that doesn't make much difference."

By this time Cullingham had pointed out more than once that the brains would not have to worry about the general nature of the entertainment they would provide, that he as editorial director would accept full responsibility, while Flaxman was enlarging in rather fulsome fashion on the wonderful wisdom the brains must have accumulated over the decades and the desirability of imparting same (in action-packed, juicy stories) to a Solar System of short-lived, body-trammeled earthlings. From time to time Rusty briefly defended his position, hedging and shifting a bit now and then, but never really giving ground.

Gaspard was at last standing beside Miss Bishop, on the outskirts of the group. As he freely admitted to himself, he was ex-

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perimenting with a yen for this ravishing acid-tempered girl—seeing how it fitted, as it were, trying on an infatuation for size. Now he thought to ingratiate himself with her a bit by voicing some fairly honest sympathies he felt for her nursing brains in their present predicament.

He murmured on for quite some time, very successfully he thought, about the brains' lonely sensitivity and refined ethical standards, the two publishers' crass approach, Cullingham's literary conceit, etcetera, ending with, "I think it's a shame that they should be subjected to all this."

She glanced at him coldly. "You do? Well, I don't, emphatically. I think it's all a very sensible idea and Rusty's a dope for not seeing it. Those brats need something to do, they need to rub up against the world and get bruised, my God how they need it. If you ask me, our bosses are acting pretty nobly. Mr. Cullingham especially is a much finer man than I ever guessed. You know, I'm beginning to think you really are a writer, Mr. Knew-it. You've certainly been talking like one. Lonely sensitivity indeed! Why don't you tend to your own ivory tower!"

Gaspard felt considerably ruffled. "Well, if you think it's such a great idea," he told her, "why don't you point it out to Rusty right now? He'd listen to you, I bet."

She grudged him another glance. "My, a great psychologist as well as a writer. I should step in and take their side when they're all arguing against Rusty? No thanks."

Just then the egg interrupted a particularly fatuous sentiment Flaxman was expressing with a, "Now, now, now, now, now hear this."

Flaxman subsided.

"I want to say something, don't interrupt," came the tinny voice out of the speaker. "I've been listening to you for a long while, I've been very patient, but the truth must be spoken. We're worlds apart, you incarnates and I, and more than worlds, for there are no worlds where I am. I exist in a darkness compared to which that of intergalactic space is brightest light. You treat me like a bright child, and I'm not a child. I'm an ancient and a baby, and more and less than either of those. We discarnates are not geniuses, we're madmen and gods. We play with insanities as you do with your toys and later with your gadgets. We create worlds and destroy them, every one of your hours. Your world is nothing to us—just one more sorry scheme among millions. We know everything that's happened to you far better than you do, and it interests us not one whit. One of

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your writers once wrote a little story about how on a bet a man let himself be locked alone in a comfortable room for five years; the first three years he asked for many books, the fourth year he asked for the Gospels, the fifth year he asked for nothing. Our situation is his, intensified a thousandfold. How could you ever think that we would stoop to writing books for you, to working out combinations and permutations of your itches and hates?

"Our loneliness is beyond your understanding. It crawls and shivers and sickens eternally. It transcends yours as death by slow torture does the warm rosy blackout of sleeping pills. We suffer this loneliness and from time to time we remember, not lovingly let me tell you, the men who put us here, the world that consigned us to eternal night and then went on its scrambling, swinging, grabbing, handling way. Once when I still had a body I read a supernatural-horror story by another of your writers. It was a fantasy about how pink winged monsters from Pluto put the brains of men in metal cylinders just like our metal eggs. You are the monsters out there—you, you, you. I always remember how that story ended: there's been an exciting scene going on, but it isn't until the end of it that the narrator realizes that his dearest friend has been helplessly listening in on the whole scene from just such a metal capsule. Then he thinks of his friend's fate—remember, it is mine too—and all he can think is, and I quote, '. . . and all the time in that fresh, shiny cylinder on the shelf . . . poor devil . . .'

"The answer is still no. Unplug me, Miss Bishop, and take me home."

Robert Schumann's song "I Will Not Grieve" conveys a feeling of terrible, glorious loneliness with its Germanic images of lost loves, diamond splendors, and coiled serpents chewing at hearts frozen in eternal night, but it is even more impressive when sung in strangely harmonious discords by a chorus of twenty-seven sealed brains.

As the last low *"nicht"* shuddered away Gaspard De La Nuit stood locked in thought. The wordmill mechanic's hair was crew-cut now and his bruises had faded to greenish brown. He took a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and lit one.

Miss Bishop darted about the Nursery unplugging speakers with astonishing rapidity, thought not swiftly enough to escape an encore of whistles, jeers and boos from the encapsulated minds.

When she returned, flicking into place an imperceptibly disturbed dark ringlet, Gaspard said, "They're just like a dormitory."

"Put out that cigarette, you

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can't smoke here. Yes, you're so right about the brats. Fads, crazes—their latest are for Byzantine history and for talking in colors with light-up spectrum speakers. Squabbles, feuds—sometimes two will refuse to be plugged in on each other for weeks on end. Criticisms, complaints and jealousies—I talk to Half Pint more than I do to the others . . . he's teacher's pet . . . I forget someone's look-listen . . . I can't put someone's eye just where he wants it . . . endless. Moods, oh good lord—sometimes one of them won't say a word for a month and I have to coax and coax, or pretend not to care, which is harder but works better in the long run. And just general copy-cat silliness—let one of them think of some new stupid way to behave and in two shakes all the others are imitating. It's like having a family of Mongolian geniuses. Miss Jackson, who goes in for history, calls them the Thirty Tyrants after some aristocrats who once bossed Athens. They're really an endless chore. Sometimes I think I never do anything in this world but change fontanels."

"But you don't actually work here twenty-four hours a day, Miss Bishop?"

"No of course not, Mr.—say can I call you Gaspard so I won't always be having to decide between Newt, Noot, Knew-it, Nooay, Noo-ee, and just plain Nut?"

"Of course you can. In that case what should I call you?"

"Miss Bishop."

He looked at her but she didn't look at him.

"Well, as I was going to say, Miss Bishop—"

"Yes, Gaspard?"

"Are you the only nurse in this Nursery?"

"No, there are six of us. Miss Jackson's on nights now, but I don't think I'm going to introduce her to you. She's just another old harridan like me."

"That won't bother me," Gaspard said ambiguously. "You know, I think our jobs are a lot alike. I am—was—a wordmill mechanic. I was in charge of giants that produced far smoother and more exciting prose than any man can write, yet I had to treat them like ordinary electrical machines. You've got a roomful of geniuses and you have to handle them like two-year-olds. We do have something in common, Miss Bishop."

"Dolly," she corrected, not looking at him.

"Miss Bishop, I would like your advice on a rather personal matter," Zane said, coming out of a long introspective silence.

"Why, of course."

"Should I leave?" Gaspard asked.

"No, please stay. Miss Bishop, as you may well have noted, I am more than a little interested in Miss Blushes."

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"An attractive creature," Dolly commented without blinking. "Generations of flesh women would have sold their souls for that wasp waist and curves as smooth as hers."

"True indeed. Perhaps too attractive—at any rate I have no problem there. No, it's the intellectual side I'm bothered about, the mental companionship angle. I'm sure you've noticed that Miss Blushes is a little—no, let's not mince words—really quite stupid. And very puritanical, as you'd expect from the profession built into her—but puritanism does narrow mental horizons and there's no two ways about it, even though prudery does have its rather dangerous charms. So there's my problem: physical attraction, a mental gulf. Miss Bishop, you're female, I'd deeply appreciate getting your impressions. How far do you think I should go with this lovely robix?"

"Well, I don't know. How far do robots generally go? Oh excuse me, Zane. I didn't mean to be flippant, but I honestly am not too sure of my knowledge. Men and robots are forever being so careful of each other's feelings, pussyfooting around instead of speaking straight out, and that makes for more mutual ignorance. Oh, I know you're divided into robots and robixes, and that these two sexes find comfort in each other, but beyond that I'm a little hazy."

"Quite understood," Zane assured her. "Well, briefly here's how it is. Robot sexuality emerged in exactly the same way as robot literature and on the latter I'm truly an authority. The earliest true robots were highly intelligent and could do their work very well—no human complaints on those scores—but they were subject to fits of extreme depression, often expressing itself in an exaggerated slave-psychology and leading to a sort of melancholia or involutional psychosis which even electroshock was wellnigh powerless to cure.

"Now there was a robot who was employed as a maid and companion by a wealthy Venezuelan lady. She often read novels to her mistress, a rare but not unheard-of service. This robot (no robixes then, although her mistress called her Maquina) was developing melancholia of the worst sort, though the servicing mechanic (imagine, no robot healers in those days!) was keeping that from Maquina's mistress. In fact he even refused to listen to Maquina's highly sympomatic dreams—this happened in the times when some humans still refused to believe that robots were truly conscious and alive, though those points had been legally established in most countries.

"One day Maquina showed an

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astounding improvement in spirits—no staring into space, no heavy-footed sleep-walking, no kneeling and bumping the head on the floor and whining, *'Vuestra esclava, Senora.'* It turned out she'd just been reading to her mistress (who didn't much care for it, I imagine) Isaac Asimov's *I, Robot* and that this old science-fiction romance had foreseen with such accuracy and pictured so vividly the actual development of robots and robot psychology that Maquina had felt herself understood and experienced a great healing rush of relief.

"You can guess the rest of the story: therapeutic reading for robots, search for accurate robot stories (very few), attempts by humans to write such stories (almost completely unsuccessful, they couldn't capture the Asimov touch), and finally the emergence of robots' authors like myself. Robot melancholia was markedly reduced, though by no means eliminated, while robot schizophrenia remained almost untouched. That was left for an even more tremendous discovery.

"At the robot servicing center of Dr. Willi von Wuppertal at Dortmund, Germany, that wise and empathetic old engineer was letting sick robots experiment in giving themselves electroshock, deciding for themselves on voltage, amperage, duration, and other conditions. Robots were rather asocial in those days, but two of them (one a newly developed, slimmed-down, ultrasensitive model) decided to take the jolt together—the same jolt in fact, so that the electrical current would enter the circuits of the one and surge directly into those of the other. To do this, it was necessary that they first plug in on each other's batteries and link wires between each other's motors and electronic brains. As soon as this was accomplished, before they hooked up to the outside electricity source, they felt a wonderful exaltation and a tingling relief. (Incidentally, Miss Bishop, this roughly answers your question as to just how far robots go.)"

Dolly looked suddenly startled. "So that's what those two robots were doing in the park," she murmured. "I thought they were repairing each other. No, please go on, Zane."

"From this discovery sprang the entire gamut of robot sexuality, becoming a vital factor in the construction or alteration of all robots. (There are still a few unaltered robots around, but they're a sad lot.) It was soon discovered that the sensations were strongest and most satisfying when the one robot was rugged —*brunch* or *robost* as we put it— and the other delicate and sensitive—*silf* or *ixy* we sometimes say. (Though too extreme a difference between the partners can make

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for danger, with the ixy one blowing out.) The two original Dortmund robots became the models for our male and female sexes, our robots and robixes, though the usual robot tendency to copy human biology and institutions was probably at work too. This last certainly played a great part not always for the best, perhaps—in patterning robot courtships, marriages, and other degrees of attachment; it has tended to discourage the development of additional sexes and in some instances makes for considerable frustration, though fortunately most jobs on which robots are employed require an equal number of brunch and ixy types.

"So there's the perspective on my problem, Miss Bishop," Zane finished. "Does it help?"

"I don't know, Zane," she said thoughtfully. "Offhand, you and Miss Blushes are hardly well-matched, though it's an old human notion that the strong brilliant husband and the beautiful dumb wife get on famously together, but I'm not sure how accurate that is. What do you think, Gaspard? How dumb is Heloise Ibsen?"

Ignoring the question as well as he could, which wasn't too well, Gaspard said, "I don't want to seem a cad, Zane, but would your relationship with Miss Blushes have to involve marriage?"

"I'm no immaculate," Zane replied, "but yes, it would. Talking to you two alone I can admit that many robots are quite promiscuous, specially when they get the chance—and by Saint Wuppertal, who's to blame them—but I'm not built that way. I find the experience incomplete and unsatisfying, unless there is a prolonged relationship at the levels of thought, feeling and action—in short, a life together. Aside from that, there is a very practical consideration in my case: I have to think about the reactions of my reading public. The hero of a Zane Gort book, as you may have noticed, is always a one-robix robot."

"Zane," Dolly said, "has it occurred to you that Miss Blushes may be pretending to be dumber than she is? Human robixes have been known to do that to flatter a man they're interested in."

"Do you think it's possible?" Zane asked excitedly. "By Willi, I believe it is! Many thanks, Miss Bishop! You've given me something to think about."

"You're welcome. Oh Lord, it's time to turn the brats and shift them around." She began to rearrange the stands according to no obvious plan, occasionally setting a silver egg on one of the larger tables during the process. Whenever she got an egg relocated it had an opposite tilt to the one it had before.

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"Is all this really necessary?" Gaspard asked.

"Gives them a little variety," she said over her shoulder. "Anyway it's one of Zukie's Rules."

"Did he—?"

"Oh yes, Mr. Daniel Zukertort set up a complete regimen governing the care of the brains and their social relations with each other—the dormitory bible you might say."

Zane Gort was watching her very attentively. After a bit the robot said, quite hesitantly, "Excuse me, Miss Bishop, but . . . would you let me hold one?"

Dolly whirled around blankly. Then her face broke into a big smile. "Why of course," she said, handing him the silver egg she was carrying.

He held it close to his blued-steel chest, not moving at all, but purring very faintly. The effect was odd, to say the least, and Gaspard found himself wondering just how much further robots might decide to go.

With Dolly supervising, Zane placed the egg in its black collar on its newly located stand.

"Miss Bishop," he said rather solemnly, "I shouldn't be saying this, but I don't believe those three brains that are spending the afternoon at Rocket House are very happy."

"What do you mean?" she said. "If they've been bitching and making self-pitying speeches that's nothing to get excited about. I know them—they'll do a lot of complaining before they give in and admit they want to be authors again."

"I suppose so," the robot agreed, "but whenever one of them would start to complain, Mr. Flaxman would unplug his speaker — at least from what I saw."

"Sometimes you have to do that," she said, a little uneasily. "But if those two have been— They swore they'd abide by Zukie's Rules; I left them a copy. What exactly did you see happen, Zane?"

"Not much. Mr. Cullingham came and closed the door when he saw I was looking. I heard one egg say, 'I can't stand it, I can't stand it. For God's sake stop. You're driving us crazy. This is torture.' "

"And then—?" Her voice was suddenly sharp and hard.

"Then Mr. Flaxman unplugged his speaker and Mr. Cullingham shut the door."

"But what were they *doing* to them?"

"I couldn't see. Mr. Flaxman had a drill on his desk."

Dolly Bishop snatched off her white cap and unzipped the white smock that covered her street clothes. "Zane," she said, "I'm putting in a hurry-up call for Miss Jackson. I don't want you to leave the Nursery 'til she gets here. Come on, Gaspard, we're going to

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look into this right now." She felt her hip and for a moment Gaspard saw outlined through the short skirt a handgun in its holster.

Even without that she looked remarkably sinister.

Reading Row was not exactly filled with activity, but it was liberally spotted with it, all of an uneasy sort. Right at the start of their short sprint Gaspard sighted a slowly cruising open roadster packed with writers. It was being trailed by a government prowlcar, fortunately. Behind that came a company car of Proton Press, Rocket's closest rival, filled with goonish characters and rough-looking robots. A scrap truck hurtled past. Just as they reached Rocket House a large helicopter drifted by with "Penfolk" in large letters on its prow; from its balcony peered bearded youths and what looked like society women; from it was suspended a huge sign:

WORDMILLS AND WRITERS
ARE FINISHED!
GIVE AUTHORSHIP
BACK TO THE AMATEURS!

Gaspard and Dolly were passed into the Rocket House by a rat-faced office-boy the wordmill mechanic didn't recognize and a tarnished door-robot with peeling gold trim—part of Flaxman's "defenses" evidently. The first floor was still heavy with the funereal odor of burnt insulation. They didn't stop to buzz at the door of the partners' office, but pushed straight in.

The three brains rested in their collars on Cullingham's end of the desk with only their microphones plugged in. The microphones were clustered near the tall fair man himself, who was holding some manuscript pages while others were scattered on the floor around his chair. A little beyond, Flaxman was leaning back with folded arms. As Dolly and Gaspard appeared he jumped up, waving the drill Zane had seen, and started to shout something at them, but then evidently thought better of it and instead lifted a finger to his lips.

At this point Gaspard and Dolly, having halted rather nonplussed, began to hear what Cullingham was reading.

"On and on the Golden Swarm surged, perching on planets, bivouacking on galaxies," the publisher intoned in a surprisingly dramatic voice. "Here and there, on scattered systems, resistance flared. But space years flashed and klirred mercilessly, and that resistance died.

"Ittala, High Khan of the Golden Swarm, called for his super-telescope. It was borne into the blood-stained pavilion by cringing scientists. He snatched it up with a savage laugh, dis-

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missed the baldpates with a contemptuous gesture, and directed it at a planet in a far-distant galaxy that had as yet escaped the yellow marauders.

"Slaver poured from the High Khan's beak and ran down his tentacles. He dug an elbow into fat Ik Huk, Master of the Harem. 'That one,' he hissed, 'the one in the *middle* of the bevy on the grassy knoll, the one wearing the radium tiara, bring her to me!'"

Dolly said out of the side of her mouth, "Zane was misled, there's no torture going on here."

"What!" Gaspard replied the same way. "Aren't you listening?"

"Oh that," she said scornfully. "As I often tell the brats, sticks and stones can break my bones—"

"But words can drive me crazy," Gaspard finished. "I don't know where they dug up that stuff, but I know that if a person used to good writing—wordmill quality, for instance—were forced to listen to it for long—"

She glanced sideways at him. "You really are a writer, Gaspard, or at least a writer's reader. I read too, but good or bad I never get worked up about it."

"Stop whispering, you two," Flaxman called. "Gaspard, you're a mechanic, take this drill and attach this bolt to the door. That lousy electrolock isn't working yet. I'm just a little sick of being burst in on."

Cullingham had stopped reading. "So there you have the opening of chapter two of *The Scourge of Space*," he said quietly, directing his voice at the three microphones. "What are your reactions? Could you improve on it? If so, how? Please state main headings under which you would organize revision."

He plugged a speaker into the smallest of the three eggs.

"You contemptible chattering ape," the speaker intoned in its quiet way, "you inflicter of horror on the helpless, you bullying chimpanzee, you exploded lemur, you overgrown spider monkey, you shambling—"

"Thank you, Half Pint," Cullingham said, pulling out the plug. "Now let's have the opinions of Nick and Double Nick."

But as he reached the plug toward another of the silver eggs, Dolly's hand came between. Without a word she rapidly disconnected the microphones from the eggs, leaving all their sockets empty.

She said, "I think I approve on the whole of what you two gentlemen are doing, but you're not going about it in quite the right way."

"Hey, quit that!" Flaxman objected. "Being the Czarina of the Nursery doesn't make you the boss here."

But Cullingham lifted his hand. "She may have something," he said.

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Dolly said, "It's a good idea to make the brats listen to all sorts of stuff and ask them to criticize it, so as to get them interested in writing. But their reactions ought to be constantly monitored—and guided." She smiled fiendishly and gave the two partners a conspiratorial wink.

Cullingham leaned forward. "Keep sending," he said.

Gaspard shrugged his shoulders disgustedly, as if to say, "Well, if it's come to the point where children can't trust their own mother . . ." and started the drill chewing into the door.

Dolly continued: "I'll attach whisper-speakers to all three of them and listen to what they're saying while you keep on reading. In the pauses you make, I'll whisper 'em back a word or two. That way they won't feel so isolated and just lose themselves in cursing you, like they're doing now. I'll absorb their griefs and at the same time work in a little propaganda for Rocket House."

"Great!" Flaxman said. Cullingham nodded.

Gaspard went back for screws. "Excuse me, Mr. Flaxman," he said, "but where in the world did you get that crud Mr. Cullingham's reading?"

"The slush pile," Flaxman confided freely. "Would you believe it?—a hundred years of nothing-but-wordmill fiction, a hundred years of nothing-but-rejections, and the amateurs are still submitting manuscripts."

Dolly completed her set-up and bent attentively over her whisper-mike and -speakers, occasionally uttering what looked like a sympathetic "Tsk-tsk." Gaspard drilled and wielded the screwdriver. Flaxman smoked a cigar. Chapter two of *The Scourge of Space* rocketed remorselessly toward its climax.

There was a little tap at the door. Gaspard opened it to admit Zane Gort.

Cullingham, a shade hoarse by now, was declaiming: "Grant took hold of the filmy bodice of Zyla, Queen of the Ice Stars, and ripped. 'Look!' he commanded the astounded space marshalls. 'Twin radar domes!'"

Zane Gort observed quietly, "You know, it's funny how humans are forever ending stories or episodes with the discovery that the beautiful woman is a robot. Just at the point where it starts to get interesting!"

"Double Nick has a comment," Dolly announced, switching his speaker to full volume.

"Gentlemen," said the silver egg, "I assume you understand that we are brains and nothing else. We have sight, hearing, the power of speech—that's all. Our glandular equipment is at a minimum, believe me. So may I ask you humbly, very humbly, how you expect us to be interested in

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turning out stories involving what you euphemistically call love?"

Dolly's lip curled in an incredulous smile, but she said nothing.

Still pursuing his own thought, Zane Gort was saying to Gaspard, "How would you like a story in which it turned out that the robot was really a beautiful woman and —bang!—it ended right there?"

"Moreover," Double Nick went on before either of the partners could compose an answer, "granting that you wish us to produce love stories, may I draw your attention to the kind of stimulation you're furnishing us, or rather its lacks? We've been locked in a back room for one hundred years, and what do you show us? Two publishers! Pardon me, sirs, but I do think you could have demonstrated a little more imagination."

Gaspard was thinking that being locked in a back room with Dolly Bishop had its sunny side, why he'd even take a chance on Miss Jackson sight unseen, while Flaxman said doubtfully, "I don't know, but maybe we could arrange something, some kind of stage show. I know a fellow runs a night club . . ."

"Furthermore," the egg ground on, "judging from the kinds of piffle you've been inflicting on us (I know you say they're rejections) the writing game has been going to pot. Now if you'd only read us some of those wordmill stories you claim are so smooth—you see during our retirement we've read almost nothing but non-fiction and of course the classics."

"I'd honestly rather not do that," Cullingham replied. "I think your output will be a lot fresher without wordmill influence. And you'll feel happier about it."

"Well, if you refuse to be frank with us and put your cards on the table, if you refuse to give us the complete picture—" The egg left its remark unfinished.

"Why don't you first be frank with us?" Cullingham said quietly. "For instance, we don't even know your name. Who are you?"

The egg was silent for a space. Then it said slowly, "I am the heart of the Twentieth Century. I'm the living corpse of a mind from the Age of Confusion, a ghost still blown by the winds of uncertainty that lashed the Earth when man first unlocked the atom and faced his destiny among the stars. I'm freedom and hate, love and fear, high ideals and low delights, a spirit exulting daily and doubting endlessly; tormented by its own limitations, a clot of flesh, a snarl of nerves, a tangle of urges, an eddy of electrons. That's what I am. My name you'll never know."

Cullingham bowed his head for a moment, then signed to Dolly. She turned down the speaker. The publisher dropped

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on the floor the remaining pages of *The Scourge of Space* and picked up a paperback. "We'll try something else for a change," he said. "Not wordmill, but very different from what you've been hearing."

"Miss Jackson get to the Nursery?" Gaspard asked Zane. They spoke in undertones.

"Oh yes," the robot replied. "Where's—?"

"What she look like?" Gaspard pressed.

"Oh, rather like Miss Bishop only blonde. Look, Gaspard, where's Miss Blushes?"

"I haven't seen her. Why?"

"She was supposed to meet me here," the robot explained. "Did you notice the government prowl-car?"

"I saw one cruising on the Row."

"Now it's parked behind Rocket House. Or another one."

Gaspard considered that.

Cullingham was intoning: "Clinch, clinch, clinch went the bost working pinchers, firming the cable to the streamlined silfish burden. Squinch, squinch, squinch went the winch as Dr. Tungsten turned it. A feelingful flood rilled the grills of his brunch frame. 'Happy landings,' he gusted softly, 'happy landings, my golden darling.' Seven seconds and thirty-five revolutions later, a shock of delicious violence trilled his plastron. He almost let go the winch crank. He turned. Vilya, gleaming silver in the glooming, was brisking the maddeningly ixy claws, never made for human service, that had but now touched him. 'Nix,' Dr. Tungsten sternly quinched. 'Nix, nix, ixy robix.'"

Dolly held up a hand. "Nick wants to say that although this is still pretty terrible, it's a lot more interesting than anything else you've been reading. Different."

"That," Zane Gort whispered modestly to Gaspard, "was me. I wrote that. My readers love cranking scenes, especially when the gold and silver robixes are both in them. Oh yes. Third book in the Dr. Tungsten series. Its title is *The Diamond Drill*—that's the name of the menace, too, Vilya's master and Dr. Tungsten's opponent in that volume. *Whirhey!*"

He had been keeping a photocell on the corridor. Now he pulled Gaspard aside and shut the door.

"Get to the front entrance," he ordered, ignoring Gaspard's protests. "Stop Miss Blushes if she tries to get out. She may be hypnotized. If you have to knock her down, hit her on the head. I'll take the back—that's where she was heading."

He skated off along the corridor, banked around the first turn, and was gone. Gaspard shrugged

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his shoulders and trotted down the escalator. The rat-faced office-boy and the tarnished door-robot hadn't seen any government men or pink robots. They didn't know who Miss Blushes was. They were a dull pair.

A weary half hour later, Zane Gort whistled to Gaspard. He had Miss Blushes firmly by the wrist. The pink robot seemed very much on her dignity, while Zane was the prey of mixed emotions.

"I didn't want to talk in front of those two at the door," the blued-steel robot said when Gaspard came up. "I don't trust them either. I've established that three government men have been snooping around inside Rocket House. They've left now. After a long search I discovered Miss Blushes hiding—"

"Not hiding," she protested. "Just thinking."

"Well then, I discovered her thinking in a ventilation duct. She says she had a fit of amnesia, that she doesn't remember anything from the time I called to her down the corridor to the time I found her. I didn't actually see her with the government men."

"But you think that she may have been reporting to them?" Gaspard prompted. "You think that they knew her?"

"Please, Mr. Nuit!" Miss Blushes objected. "Not 'knew,' but 'were acquainted with.'"

"Why do you keep objecting to 'knew'?" Gaspard demanded, simultaneously exasperated and tantalized.

"Don't you ever read your bible?" the pink censoring robot replied scathingly. "Adam *knew* Eve, and that was the beginning of all those begattings. Please don't deliberately try to embarrass me."

She flirted her wrist from Zane Gort's grasp and started off, head held high. The robots' author followed her closely, though he did not quite touch her.

"I think you're getting too suspicious, Zane," Gaspard said with forced cheerfulness, bringing up the rear. "What reason would government men have to be interested in Rocket House?"

"The same reason that every consciousness in the system has—flesh, metal, or Venusian vegetable," the robot replied darkly, almost with a touch of scorn. "Rocket House has something potentially valuable that no one else has. That's all you ever need. Why Gaspard, if you were a robot, you'd *feel* the vibrations of menace converging on this place." He shook his head. "I must take better precautions," he muttered.

As they approached the door to the partners' office, Dolly Bishop threw it open, letting a surge of chatter escape into the hall.

"Hi, Gaspard," she called gaily. "Hello, Zane. How do, Miss

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Blushes. You two boys are just in time to help me trek the brats back to the Nursery."

"What's happened?" Gaspard asked. "Sounds like everybody's happy."

"Sure are! The brats have agreed to give Rocket's proposal a whirl. They'll each write a trial story up to novella length, strict anonymity, no editorial direction. Your first assignment, Mr. Flaxman says, will be to rent twenty-three voicewriters — Rocket can scare up seven."

Getting a story down on paper is never a bed of roses, and in any case the sleeping accommodations during the Silver Eggheads' Writing Contest were particularly thorny. As Zane Gort had wisely pointed out, everyone on the outside sensed that Rocket House was on to something, with the result that there was nothing but trouble, crime and confusion from start to finish.

Acting on inaccurate tips supplied by Miss Blushes, Department of Justice men raided Rocket House, hunting for hidden wordmills, novels previously milled in excess of quota, and evidence that Rocket had engineered the revolt of the writers. They discovered the eggheads, but laughed at the notion that they could write anything. Department files proved they were all idiots. Besides, they were so much smaller than wordmills.

Highjackers broke into Rocket's storage lofts and trucked off twenty percent of the treasure of milled but as yet undistributed books, comprising sixty percent of the titles. It was a disastrous loss. Any new books getting into the black market during the shortage could be disposed of instantly at stiff prices.

But in spite of all the excitement, or more likely because of it, all thirty stores got written. Rusty's, contrary to expectations, was an almost overlength novella.

Rocket House had prettied itself up for the judging of the eggheads' writing contest (to continue to call it that). At least the electrolock on the partners' door was working and the escalator was running at last.

Flaxman and Cullingham had elected to read all the manuscripts between them. They had both taken Prestissimo pills to increase their reading speed and the endless sheets from the voicewriters moved across the faces of the two reading machines at a fast clip.

All the Rocket House faithful were present in the big office, even Miss Blushes, on Zane Gort's earnest request. It had been decided not to have the eggs physically present, but there was a two-way TV link between the Nursery and the office. A picture-window-size TV screen showed Miss Jackson, looking like Dolly's

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twin with her hair curly-dark now. She was surrounded by a battery of small TV eyes—despite their lonely intellectual grandeur, the eggs had developed a sudden interest which Dolly at least had predicted.

The two partners made no comments and concealed all their reactions, good or bad, even while changing rolls, which created—for the others at least—a nervous light-headed excitement.

"Boy, that Nursery is a different place with thirty voicewriters going!" Dolly said to Gaspard where he sat with a foot propped on another chair. "It's a funny thing," she added, frowning, "that we never thought of using voicewriters before."

Gaspard looked up at her a bit strangely. "There are a lot of funny things about the Nursery," he said. "I've had time to do some thinking."

"What do you mean?"

"Tell you later."

Cullingham had finished his pile of rolls. He sat back for a moment. He reflectively started to run his hand through his scanty hair. Then he said, "Shutofftheteeveeforaminutewillyou?" It sounded like *quick-quack-quack-quock-quack* very fast.

Zane Gort caught his meaning and touched a dial. The big screen went gray.

Cullingham looked across at Flaxman, who was putting his last roll in the machine. The tall publisher had his voice under control now to the extent of not letting the diffusing effect of the Prestissimo pills speed it up. In fact the words came out rather slowly as he inquired, "How are yours?"

Flaxman looked back. His impassive look changed to one of deep sadness. With a painful hushed respectfulness, like one reporting the tragic toll of a flashfire in a kindergarten, he said softly, "They stink. They all stink."

Cullingham nodded. "So do mine."

Flaxman shrugged, bent his head, and set his reading machine spinning.

The others gravitated over to Cullingham, like pallbearers clustering around a funeral director.

"It's not lack of skill or inventiveness," Cullingham explained quietly. "And although it might have helped, it's not even lack of editorial direction." As he said that he looked around at them with a faint quizzical smile.

"No simple human sympathies, I suppose?" Gaspard ventured.

"Or strong plot-line?" Gort added.

"Or reader-identification?" Miss Blushes put in.

Cullingham nodded. "But more than that," he said, "it's simply the incredible conceit of the things, their swollen ego-center-

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edness. These aren't stories, they're puzzles—and most of them insoluble at that. *Finnegans Wake, Mars Violet,* and the riddling Icelandic bards aren't in it for sheer perverse complexity. It adds up to this: the eggheads have tried to be as confusing as possible to show how brilliant they are."

"I told them—" Dolly started to say and then broke off. She was crying quietly.

"They're hardly to be blamed," the publisher pointed out sympathetically. "Being locked-up minds and little else, it was natural that they should come to look on ideas as things to play with, to fit together in odd patterns, to string over and over again like beads.

"Why, one of the manuscripts is in the form of an epic poem, mixing together, sometimes in one sentence, about seventeen languages. Another tries to be an epitome of all literature, from the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* down through Shakespeare and Shaw and Hammerberg. Another —Oh, they're not all as bad as that. A couple of them are the sort of thing you'd expect a gifted writer to do while he's still a college student and trying to dazzle the professors. One—by Double Nick, I'd guess—is even pseudo-popular and uses all the good cliches and smooth techniques, but in a contemptuous, cold-blooded way—no warmth at all. But most of them—"

"The brats aren't really cold-blooded," Dolly protested brokenly. "They're . . ."

Cullingham waited a moment, then nodded sympathetically and turned to the others. "As I was going to say—well, just listen to this."

He picked up a roll he'd set apart from the others, twirled it open a couple of feet, and began to read.

"This idarks motherlink lie spirit ash inner Brinks firebucks a lazy headshell sings black O' this clobsit air whering marblying pillawrying and dying. Four in a butting mold tease inner ease maykister esau—"

"Cully!"

They looked around at Flaxman. The small publisher's eyes were glued to the flying sheet. His face was radiant.

"Cully, this is terrific!" he said without looking up or slowing the machine. "It's a system-wide knockout! It does everything a Scribner Scribe story can do and more. You have only to read a couple of pages—"

But Cullingham was already peering avidly over his shoulder and the others were jockeying around for glimpses.

"It's about a girl who's born on Ganymede without a sense of touch," Flaxman explained, still soaking it up. "She becomes a

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nightclub dancer and the story travels around the system, there's a famous surgeon in it, but the sympathy with which the author presents that girl, the way he gets you right inside her . . . It's called *You've Hurt My Feelings—*"

"That's Half Pint's story!" Dolly revealed excitedly. "He kept telling me the plot. I put it last because I was afraid it wasn't much good, not as clever as the others."

"Boy, would you make a lousy editor!" Flaxman chortled happily.

Ten minutes later Half Pint was on the TV screen, all his three elements plugged in, and Flaxman was impulsively asking the undersize silver egg, "How'd you do it, boy? What's your secret? I'm asking because—I hope they won't mind my saying so—I think all your pals can profit from it."

"I just stayed glued to the voicewriter and let the mighty brain work," Half Pint asserted a little drunkenly. "I let myself go. I started the universe whirling like a merry-go-round and grabbed at things as they went by . . ." He paused. "No I didn't," he said more slowly. "At least that wasn't all I did. I'll tell you the real secret. Miss Bishop wrote my story."

"Half Pint, you idiot!" Dolly squealed.

"Yes you did, Momma. It all came to life when I was telling you the plot. I was thinking of you every minute, trying to make you understand. You're the girl in the story too, Momma—or maybe I am, maybe I'm the girl who can't feel—no, now I'm getting confused . . . At any rate, there's a barrier, an anesthesia, and we get around it . . ."

"I wish there were some prize we could give you, Half Pint," Flaxman said almost tearfully. "Some real prize . . ."

"Aw nuts, Mr. Flaxman. We don't need any prize, do we, Momma?"

Ten minutes after that Cullingham was explaining to the others in the office (the TV was gray again): "So you see it really is a matter of editorial cooperation though not direction. A kind of symbiosis. Each brain needs a sensitive live human being that it can tell its story to, that it can feel through, a partner who isn't imprisoned. It depends on getting the right person for each brain. There's a job I'll enjoy working at! It'll be a little like conducting a marriage bureau."

Flaxman looked at his partner with a certain awe, while Gaspard added, "Yes, and once we have wordmills again, with their bigger-than-human stock of memories and sensations, just think of what a three-way possibility we'll have. One egghead, one two-legged writer, and one wordmill —what a writing team that'll be!"

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Flaxman started to say something, but the telephone on his desk chimed and he hopped to it.

"I'm not sure wordmills will ever be built again, or at least ever used to the same extent," Cullingham said thoughtfully, adding his quota of surprise to the conversation. "I've programmed them most of my adult life and they're wonderful, but I've never been able to get around the fact that they simply aren't robots, they aren't alive. The purr of those perfect adjectives is ultimately the purr of a dead machine. They never made the corny but blessed mistake of writing about themselves, as the Bishop-Half Pint team has done—or you, Zane Gort."

"Or for that matter, you, Mr. Cullingham," the robot suggested. "You could team with Double Nick."

"So I could," the tall fair man agreed. "I might go anonymous too—after all, I've never been anything else." He smoothed his hair once more. The others nodded agreeably but watched him a little strangely.

"Incidentally," Gaspard resumed, striding up and down excitedly, "I think I know a prize that would be the one Flaxman was talking about, something that would really please Half Pint and his buddies."

The others looked at him expectantly.

"Dolly," he said, "I told you there was something funny about the Nursery. It's in Zukie's Rules, though it's never actually stated in them—he was much too shrewd. That old boy has had more influence, molded the development of things (yes, and deliberately thwarted that development too) more than anyone has ever realized.

"Daniel Zukertort wanted to create undistracted spirits, minds without any bodies at all. Now, of course, as he himself knew very well, he didn't really do that, for the brains do have bodies just as much as any elephant or amoeba —I mean they have nervous tissue, a chopped-down glandular set-up, a circulatory system even though it's run by an isotope-pump, and a digestive and excretory system depending on fontanel-carried food elements and oxygen and CO_2 exchanging through the microscopically porous lower half of the shell between a contained lung element and the outer air.

"But Zukie didn't want the eggs to think of themselves as having bodies, he wanted to suppress that fact, keep it out of their consciousness, so they'd concentrate on eternal verities and the realm of ideas, and not start thinking about how to operate in the real world again as soon as they got a little bored.

"Physiology was on his side, for the brain has no feelings in itself,

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no sense of pain or anything like that. Touch the brain, torture it even, and you don't get pain, just weird sensations.

"Zukertort gave his sealed minds only the minimum of senses and powers. Sight and hearing, but none of the earthier, guttier senses. And the power of speech—he had to let them have that, so mankind could learn the spiritual discoveries the brains made out there in nowhere.

"But he set up the Nursery Rules in such a way that the eggs would think of themselves, and be thought of, as helpless invalids, paralytics. He played on two of the strongest human urges: the desire (on the part of the brains) to be eternally helpless and cared for and the desire (on the part of the nurses) to endlessly mother and coddle and protect from all harm.

"Now I think we all know the loss the brains feel the most keenly—it's the power of manipulation. That's why whenever they get mad they compare us to monkeys. It's because they envy us so. Monkeys grabbing things, turning them over, twisting, prying, pulling, handling, feeling—"

"But you can't go inside them and attach some sort of machines to the stumps of their kinaesthetic and voluntary-muscle nerves," Dolly protested excitedly. "I've thought of that sometimes, but no one but Zukertort could have done it. No one has the skill to go inside their shells and—"

"I'm not talking about going inside their shells! I'm not talking about anything one-tenth as difficult. Voicewriters — there's your clue. If the eggs can operate voicewriters, then with the proper sound-keyed instruments, they can use their voices to operate artificial hands and grappling devices, vehicles to carry them around, hammers, saws, chisels, knives, microscopes, pens, paint brushes—"

"Hey!" Flaxman shouted, putting his hand over the phone. "Don't you steal my writers! They're supposed to stay in the Nursery and turn out stories, not go prancing around the system painting pictures and getting all worked up about wood-carving."

"But maybe some kind of compromise—" Gaspard called back. "These new experiences will *bring* the greatest stories out of them."

"Okay, okay—just so long as you consult me first." The publisher dove back again into his phone call.

Dolly squeezed Gaspard's hand. "The Nursery'll be a real madhouse," she said. "We'll be looking back to the quiet days when the brats just had voicewriters. There'll be all these visiting collaborators—we'll have to knock out walls. There'll be workbenches, ping-pong tables, life classes—"

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"You won't mind?" Gaspard asked her a little guiltily.

She wrinkled her nose. "Kids have to grow up." She looked at him. "I'll find something to do."

"But they'll need help and companionship in growing up," Zane Gort pointed out. "I have a wonderful electric workshop in mind and a series of voice-operated tools approaching robot claws in versatility, strength and delicacy. The very thought makes me feel newly built—in fact I find myself getting a new perspective on my entire future life." He slowly looked around. "Miss Blushes," he said to the pink robix, "I have a question to ask you, a far-reaching proposal to make. Will you—"

"Listen here, all of you!" Flaxman commanded, springing up from the phone. "While you've been patting each other on the back and billy-cooing, I've been filling in some last-minute dope on what other publishers are planning to do—and already doing! The news is all breaking at once, and let me tell you that Rocket House had better pull some miracles right away or fold! Harper scientists have discovered how to convert advanced anadigital computers into wordmills! Houghton Mifflin has done the same with a checkers-and-logistics machine! Doubleday has screened two thousand scribes and weeded out seven who have real promise! Random House has made a system-wide search and discovered three talented foundling robots who have lived their entire lives among humans, without metal companionship, and in consequence think, feel and *write* exactly like humans! Proton Press has a human sex novel on the stands by a two-year-old French robix! Dutton has two out authored by editorial directors. Van Nostrand is bannering a series of fictionalized case histories supplied by robot analysts. Oxford Press has discovered on Venus a colony of artists who have lived two generations in complete isolation from tunemill music, computed pictures and wordmill fiction—and fifty percent of the colony are *writers!* Unless we get off our tails and work like sixty—each egg for two—we'll be out in the street! And I mean you eggs as well as them! Gort, where's the next Dr. Tungsten book? I know there's been all this work, but you were supposed to have the manuscript in two weeks ago!"

"One moment," the blued-steel robot said imperturbably. He turned to his pink partner. "Miss Blushes," he said simply, "I was about to ask you if you would enter into the co-working agreement with me, the long-term one."

"Oh yes," she cried faintly, throwing herself against his plastron. "You've always been my hero. I've never found anything

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wrong in the Dr. Tungsten books."

"That situation may change just a little," Zane Gort calmly revealed as he gently crushed her aluminum to his steel. "I have in mind a new love-interest for the doctor. But don't worry, dear, I'll help you readjust."

Gaspard turned Dolly toward him. "About that 'something to do,'" he said, "I think you're ixy-ixier than Heloise Ibsen could ever hope to be."

"And I think you're real brunch," she told him, coming into his arms. "Almost as brunch as Zane Gort."

Through Time And Space With Ferdinand Feghoot: X

There was a great deal of ignorant opposition on Earth to Ferdinand Feghoot's *Galactic Concordat of 2133,* which made interstellar tourism universally possible.

Fortunately, Feghoot was present when the first tourist landed in Old Sanfran Cisco, right where a new office building was being constructed. The tourist was a striped, felinoid being from a planet called *Mrrr-ow;* except for his long double tail he looked like an overweight Bengal tiger. He paid no attention to Feghoot or to the nervous crowd which had gathered. He was interested only in the fence round the building, through which, until a few minutes previously, numerous sidewalk superintendents had been peering. He sat down beside it. He purred. He reached out a huge claw, hooked it into one of the holes in the fence, pulled out a piece of the succulent pine, munched it, and purred even more loudly. Then he repeated the process again and again.

A small, waspish woman dashed forward, carrying a sign which said, MONSTERS LEAVE OUR DAUGHTERS ALONE!!! *Kill it!* she screamed. *Nobody ever saw anything like it before!*

An ugly murmur came from the crowd—but Ferdinand Feghoot rose neatly to the occasion. "Nonsense," he laughed. "It's nothing to be afraid of. It's only a purr-pull peephole eater."

—GRENDEL BRIARTON

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Recommended Reading

by Anthony Boucher

I WANT TO START OFF BY GIVING you a small warning:

Watch out for women who ask, "Are you interested in interplanetary spaceships?"

It seems a harmless enough query. I naturally answered, "Yes," expecting to go on to a discussion of the latest conjectures of Ley or Clarke or von Braun.

But *interplanetary spaceships*, it seems, is the latest UFOmism for flying saucers—and a wonderful device for repelling skeptics: anybody can say "I don't think saucers" or even "I don't think Unidentified Flying Objects come from space"; but it takes guts to say, "I don't think interplanetary spaceships come from space." *Moral:* Build the definition into the terminology.

And I had now committed myself as a no-holds-barred saucer enthusiast. Next thing I had received a mimeographed booklist of 142 titles, at least 71 of which were devoted exclusively to saucers and particularly to "contact" with saucer people. (My own collection of saucer books, which I had thought was fairly comprehensive, consists of only 28 titles.) The other titles, with a pretty impartiality among cultists, included OAHSPE, THE SEARCH FOR BRIDEY MURPHY, SUMMARY OF SCIENTOLOGY and THE POWER OF POSITIVE THINKING.

I shall not detail the meeting of "spaceship" believers which I attended, beyond mentioning that it was conducted by a very young man who quite soberly observed to me that next week's speaker would advocate a health-food diet because "a high percentage of our people are interested in nutrition anyway. The Space People are teaching it. It's part of The Program." There isn't room here to do justice to that meeting or to all that it implies.

For it's the implications that are terrifying. On the surface this is all very amusing; but the fact that a large number of technically sane, educated people can seriously discuss the adventure of, for instance, Reinhold O. Schmidt [who, on November 5, 1957, near Kearney, Nebraska, visited an interplanetary spaceship whose crew spoke English to him but "among themselves talked high German," and which had "regular and Roman nu-

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merals on the instrument panel"] seems to cast doubt upon such basic democratic concepts as universal education and universal suffrage.

But there is another aspect to this matter of saucers.

On October 6, 1958, the U. S. Air Force, according to the Associated Press, "threw some more cold water on flying saucer reports." For the 13-month period from July 1, 1957, to July 31, 1958, the USAF "investigated a record total of 1270 saucer reports." Of these, 14% (178) were inadequately reported. A whopping 84% (1067) were attributable to "natural phenomena, hoaxes, birds or man-made objects." The remaining 2% (25) "were classified as of unknown origin."

As we've done occasionally in the past, let's turn these figures around. Sure, 2% looks like nothing at all; but try putting it this way:

Twice a month the Air Force receives a completely adequate report, clearly not a hoax, with all necessary data for investigation, of an aerial object which the AF's investigators, after 11 years of practice, can find no possible way of accounting for.

And I venture to suggest that complete publication of the detailed Air Force reports on the stubborn 2% would make the most fascinating and valuable saucer book yet.

Such books have, so far, been largely aimed at the ecstatically idiotic audience of true believers, and have set new lows in their slovenly disregard of the minimum standards of responsibility and even coherence. But one recent entry in the field is a striking exception: Aimé Michel's FLYING SAUCERS AND THE STRAIGHT-LINE MYSTERY, translated and edited by the Research Division of Civilian Saucer Intelligence of New York (Criterion, $4.50).

Michel (who may be remembered for his above-average THE TRUTH ABOUT FLYING SAUCERS two years ago) believes that he has discovered a new principle called *orthoteny*, according to which the saucer-sightings of any given short period tend, far more often than chance would permit, to form plottable straight lines of 3 or more points. It seems to me that he falls short of proving his case; but he does give interesting accounts and analyses of a number of unfamiliar French sightings, managing to avoid both the Scylla of gullibility and the Charybdis of over-skepticism.

What's even more attractive than Michel's book, however, is the editing job performed by Isabel Davis, Alexander Mebane and other members of Civilian Saucer Intelligence. Bibliographical and other annotation, appendixes on American sightings, thorough indexing and all other imaginable

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apparatus make this a book to shame most trade publishers in this country.

Civilian Saucer Intelligence is, quite clearly, an organization of a different type from that whose meeting I attended. Its intent is to "collect reports; investigate at first hand, when possible; evaluate evidence by established scientific principles; and disseminate its findings." An interesting Statement of Policy adopted 2 years ago and still unchanged reads: "CSI of New York believes that:

"There are as yet unidentified objects or manifestations in our atmosphere.

"They are of diverse forms, suggesting various origins.

"Some of them appear to be material objects.

"Some seem to be controlled by intelligences.

"Some appear to be constructions.

"Some of them appear to have landed.

"CSI has no reason at this time to believe that:

"UFOs have any occult or religious connotation.

"Anyone on this earth has had any communication with UFOs or their occupants."

If you think this seems a reasonable program and policy, you might get in touch with the CSI, c/o Davis, 67 Jane St., New York 14. Annual dues are $5 for New Yorkers, $3.50 for others.

One of the finest sources of imaginative humor these days lies in the work of foreign cartoonists. America and England have their great individual fantasts; but the cartoonists of the continent seem all to inhabit a somewhat mad, unreal and wholly delightful world. SLIGHTLY OUT OF ORDER, by members of the Association Internationale des Humoristes, edited by Ralph E. Shikes (Viking, $3.50), is one of the funniest and most fantastic collections in years, largely by artists not yet well known here – and an unusually well designed and printed volume. André François's THE HALF-NAKED KNIGHT (Knopf, $3.95) is very nearly as fine, and particularly interesting for its inclusion of many drawings in a technique which François has described as "cartoons worked out seriously." Giovannetti's BEWARE THE DOG (Macmillan, $3.50) may not technically be fantasy but it fits into this same splendidly disordered world. On this side of the Atlantic, CARTOON LAFFS FROM TRUE (Crest, 25¢) is more high-fantastical than most American collections, especially in a number of fine Partch contributions; and Walt Kelly's G. O. FIZZICKLE POGO (Simon & Schuster, $1) is of particular interest to s.f. readers with its discussion of moon flight, canal building, witch doctors and other topics suitable to the 18-month g.o. fizzickle year.

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But the most laughs that I have enjoyed (if that is quite the word) in some months came from the September issue of that always admirable amateur magazine, *Inside Science Fiction*, which features a long and minutely detailed parody-pastiche of F&SF. It's as comic as it is accurate; and you, unlike me, can happily read it for laughs alone without wincing at merciless sharpshooting. Send 30¢ to editor Ron Smith, Box 401, Berkeley, Calif.—or why not make it $1 for a subscription?

DEALS WITH THE DEVIL, compiled and edited by Basil Davenport (Dodd, Mead, $4). Almost a supplement to our annual BESTS: 9 of the 25 stories are from these pages. The rest range widely and some are *very* familiar; but familiarity is no drawback in so definitive a study of a classic fantasy-theme, compiled with such discrimination and with such polished commentary. A must for all fantasy libraries.

HAVE SPACE SUIT—WILL TRAVEL, by Robert A. Heinlein (Scribner's, $2.95). Hardcover edition of the F&SF serial (1958); recommended to Christmas shoppers.

WAR OF THE WING-MEN and THE SNOWS OF GANYMEDE, by Poul Anderson (Ace, 35¢). WAR is the recent *Astounding* serial, THE MAN WHO COUNTS—a wonderful combination of an alien planet and civilization extrapolated with as great care as a Hal Clement novel, with all of Anderson's own vigorous action-narrative (a superb battle!) and some niceties of character-depiction. Intellectually stimulating, and plain damned exciting. The shorter story (*Startling*, 1955) is sound but a mite tired and talky—worth reading, but short of major Anderson.

THE LINCOLN HUNTERS, by Wilson Tucker (Rinehart, $2.95). "Lost speech" by Lincoln (May 29, 1856) makes ideal objective for time-travel research. Tucker's best book since THE LONG LOUD SILENCE, with double appeal of time - adventure - ingenuity and warmly studied Lincoln episode.

SPACE CAT AND THE KITTENS, by Ruthven Todd (Scribner's, $2.50). Slightly less effective than its predecessors, but still a charming example of juvenile (7-10) s.f. witty and cattish enough to delight adults. (But "Alpha Centauri, some nine thousand light years away from Earth"! Really, Mr. Todd! And Messrs. Scribner's!)

EDGE OF TIME, by David Grinnell (Avalon, $2.75). Some of the season's fastest "science" doubletalk accounts for a microcosm moving at a hyperaccelerated time-rate. Little plot, but fair amusement.

THE BRIDES OF SOLOMON, by Geoffrey Household (Atlantic-Little, Brown, $3.75). Grand adventure collection including one unexpected and excellent fantasy, *Letter to a Sister*.

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Philip K. Dick's last appearance in these pages was with a macabre short story called The Father-Thing, *in December 1954. In the five years since, Mr. Dick has turned his attention exclusively to novel-writing. We have to confess that we thought his* EYE IN THE SKY *almost made up for the acute short story shortage—but we are nonetheless most pleased to have pried loose this new evidence of Mr. Dick's special talent for the shockingly unexpected.*

EXPLORERS WE

by Philip K. Dick

"GOLLY," PARKHURST GASPED, HIS red face tingling with excitement. "Come here, you guys. Look!"

They crowded around the viewscreen.

"There she is," Barton said. His heart beat strangely. "She sure looks good."

"Damn right she looks good," Leon agreed. He trembled. "Say—I can make out New York."

"The hell you can."

"I can! The gray. By the water."

"That's not even the United States. We're looking at it upside down. That's Siam."

The ship hurtled through space, meteoroid shields shrieking. Below it, the blue-green globe swelled. Clouds drifted around it, hiding the continents and oceans.

"I never expected to see her again," Merriweather said. "I thought sure as hell we were stuck up there." His face twisted. "Mars. That damn red waste. Sun and flies and ruins."

"Barton knows how to repair jets," Captain Stone said. "You can thank *him*."

"You know what I'm going to do, first thing I'm back?" Parkhurst yelled.

"What?"

"Go to Coney Island."

"Why?"

"People. I want to see people again. Lots of them. Dumb, sweaty, noisy. Ice cream and water. The ocean. Beer bottles, milk cartons, paper napkins—"

"And gals," Vecchi said, eyes shining. "Long time, six months. I'll go with you. We'll sit on the beach and watch the gals."

"I wonder what kind of bath-

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ing suits they got now," Barton said.

"Maybe they don't wear any!" Parkhurst cried.

"Hey!" Merriweather shouted. "I'm going to see my wife again." He was suddenly dazed. His voice sank to a whisper. "My wife."

"I got a wife, too," Stone said. He grinned. "But I been married a long time." Then he thought of Pat and Jean. A stabbing ache choked his wind-pipe. "I bet they have grown."

"Grown?"

"My kids," Stone said huskily.

They looked at each other, six men, ragged, bearded, eyes bright and feverish.

"How long?" Vecchi whispered.

"An hour," Stone said. "We'll be down in an hour."

The ship struck with a crash that threw them on their faces. It leaped and bucked, brake jets screaming, tearing through rocks and soil. It came to rest, nose buried in a hillside.

Silence.

Parkhurst got unsteadily to his feet. He caught hold of the safety rail. Blood dripped down his face from a cut over his eye.

"We're down," he said.

Barton stirred. He groaned, forced himself up on his knees. Parkhurst helped him. "Thanks. Are we . . ."

"We're down. We're back."

The jets were off. The roaring had ceased . . . there was only the faint trickle of wall fluids leaking out on the ground.

The ship was a mess. The hull was cracked in three places. It billowed in, bent and twisted. Papers and ruined instruments were strewn everywhere.

Vecchi and Stone got slowly up. "Everything all right?" Stone muttered, feeling his arm.

"Give me a hand," Leon said. "My damn ankle's twisted or something."

They got him up. Merriweather was unconscious. They revived him and got him to his feet.

"We're down," Parkhurst repeated, as if he couldn't believe it. "This is Earth. We're back—alive!"

"I hope the specimens are all right," Leon said.

"The hell with the specimens!" Vecchi shouted excitedly. He worked the port bolts frantically, unscrewing the heavy hatch-lock. "Let's get out and walk around."

"Where are we?" Barton asked Captain Stone.

"South of San Francisco. On the peninsula."

"San Francisco! Hey—we can ride the cable cars!" Parkhurst helped Vecchi unscrew the hatch. "San Francisco. I was through 'Frisco, once. They got a big park. Golden Gate Park. We can go to the funhouse."

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The hatch opened, swinging wide. Talk ceased abruptly. The men peered out, blinking in the white-hot sunlight.

A green field stretched down and away from them. Hills rose in the distance, sharp in the crystal air. Along a highway below a few cars moved, tiny dots, the sun glinting on them. Telephone poles.

"What's that sound?" Stone said, listening intently.

"A train."

It was coming along the distant track, black smoke pouring from its stack. A faint wind moved across the field, stirring the grass. Over to the right lay a town. Houses and trees. A theater marquee. A Standard Gas Station. Roadside stands. A motel.

"Think anybody saw us?" Leon asked.

"Must have."

"Sure heard us," Parkhurst said. "We made a noise like God's indigestion when we hit."

Vecchi stepped out onto the field. He swayed wildly, arms outstretched. "I'm falling!"

Stone laughed. "You'll get used to it. We've been in space too long. Come on." He leaped down. "Let's start walking."

"Toward the town." Parkhurst fell in beside him. "Maybe they'll give us free eats . . . Hell—champagne!" His chest swelled under his tattered uniform. "Returning heroes. Keys to the town. A parade. Military band. Floats with dames."

"Dames," Leon grunted. "You're obsessed."

"Sure." Parkhurst strode across the field, the others trailing after him. "Hurry up!"

"Look," Stone said to Leon. "Somebody over there. Watching us."

"Kids," Barton said. "A bunch of kids." He laughed excitedly. "Let's go say hello."

They headed toward the kids, wading through the moist grass on the rich earth.

"Must be spring," Leon said. "The air smells like spring." He took a deep breath. "And the grass."

Stone computed. "It's April ninth."

They hurried. The kids stood watching them, silent and unmoving.

"Hey!" Parkhurst shouted. "We're back!"

"What town is this?" Barton shouted.

The kids stared at them, eyes wide.

"What's wrong?" Leon muttered.

"Our beards. We look pretty bad." Stone cupped his hands. "Don't be scared! We're back from Mars. The rocket flight. Two years ago — remember? A year ago last October."

The kids stared, white-faced. Suddenly they turned and fled.

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They ran frantically toward the town.

The six men watched them go.

"What the hell," Parkhurst muttered, dazed. "What's the matter?"

"Our beards," Stone repeated uneasily.

"Something's wrong," Barton said, shakily. He began to tremble. "There's something terribly wrong."

"Can it!" Leon snapped. "It's our beards." He ripped a piece of his shirt savagely away. "We're dirty. Filthy tramps. Come on." He started after the children, toward the town. "Let's go. They probably got a special car on the way here. We'll meet them."

Stone and Barton glanced at each other. They followed Leon slowly. The others fell in behind.

Silent, uneasy, the six bearded men made their way across the field toward the town.

A youth on a bicycle fled at their approach. Some railroad workers, repairing the train track, threw down their shovels and ran yelling.

Numbly, the six men watched them go.

"What is it?" Parkhurst muttered.

They crossed the track. The town lay on the other side. They entered a huge grove of eucalyptus trees.

"Burlingame," Leon said, reading a sign. They looked down a street. Hotels and cafes. Parked cars. Gas stations. Dime stores. A small suburban town, shoppers on the sidewalks. Cars moving slowly.

They emerged from the trees. Across the street a filling station attendant looked up—

And froze.

After a moment, he dropped the hose he held and ran down the main street, shouting shrill warnings.

Cars stopped. Drivers leaped out and ran. Men and women poured out of stores, scattering wildly. They surged away, retreating in frantic haste.

In a moment the street was deserted.

"Good God." Stone advanced, bewildered. "What—" He crossed onto the street. No one was in sight.

The six men walked down the main street, dazed and silent. Nothing stirred. Everyone had fled. A siren wailed, rising and falling. Down a side street a car backed quickly away.

In an upstairs window Barton saw a pale, frightened face. Then the shade was jerked down.

"I don't understand," Vecchi muttered.

"Have they gone nuts?" Merriweather asked.

Stone said nothing. His mind was blank. Numb. He felt tired. He sat down on the curb and

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rested, getting his breath. The others stood around him.

"My ankle," Leon said. He leaned against a stop sign, lips twisting with pain. "Hurts like hell."

"Captain," Barton said. "What's the matter with them?"

"I don't know," Stone said. He felt in his ragged pocket for a cigarette. Across the street was a deserted cafe. The people had run out of it. Food was still on the counter. A hamburger was scorching on the skillet, coffee was boiling in a glass pot on the burner.

On the sidewalk lay groceries spilling out from bags dropped by terrorized shoppers. The motor of a deserted parked car purred to itself.

"Well?" Leon said. "What'll we do?"

"I don't know."

"We can't just—"

"I don't know!" Stone got to his feet. He walked over and entered the cafe. They watched him sit down at the counter.

"What's he doing?" Vecchi asked.

"I don't know." Parkhurst followed Stone into the cafe. "What are you doing?"

"I'm waiting to be served."

Parkhurst plucked awkwardly at Stone's shoulder. "Come on, Captain. There's nobody here. They all left."

Stone said nothing. He sat at the counter, his face vacant. Waiting passively to be served.

Parkhurst went back out. "What the hell has happened?" he asked Barton. "What's wrong with them all?"

A spotted dog came nosing around. It passed them, stiff and alert, sniffing suspiciously. It trotted off down a side street.

"Faces," Barton said.

"Faces?"

"They're watching us. Up there." Barton gestured toward a building. "Hiding. *Why?* Why are they hiding from us?"

Suddenly Merriweather stiffened. "Something's coming."

They turned eagerly.

Down the street two black sedans turned the corner, headed toward them.

"Thank God," Leon muttered. He leaned against the wall of a building. "Here they are."

The two sedans pulled to a stop at the curb. The doors opened. Men spilled out, surrounded them silently. Well-dressed. Ties and hats and long gray coats.

"I'm Scanlan," one said. "F.B.I." An older man with iron-gray hair. His voice was clipped and frigid. He studied the five of them intently. "Where's the other?"

"Captain Stone? In there." Barton pointed to the cafe.

"Get him out here."

Barton went into the cafe. "Captain, they're outside. Come on."

Stone came along with him, back to the curb. "Who are they,

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Barton?" he asked haltingly.

"Six," Scanlan said, nodding. He waved to his men. "Okay. This is all."

The F.B.I. men moved in, crowding them back toward the brick front of the cafe.

"Wait," Barton cried thickly. His head spun. "What — what's happening?"

"What is it?" Parkhurst demanded desperately. Tears rolled down his face, streaking his cheeks. "Will you tell us, for God's sake—"

The F.B.I. men had weapons. They got them out. Vecchi backed away, his hands up. "Please!" he wailed. "What have we done? What's happening?"

Sudden hope flickered in Leon's breast. "They don't know who we are. They think we're Commies." He addressed Scanlan. "We're the Earth-Mars Expedition. My name is Leon. Remember? A year ago last October. We're *back*. We're back from Mars." His voice trailed off. The weapons were coming up. Nozzles — hoses and tanks.

"We're back!" Merriweather croaked. "We're the Earth-Mars Expedition, come back!"

Scanlan's face was expressionless. "That sounds fine," he said coldly. "Only, the ship crashed and blew up when it reached Mars. None of the crew survived. We know because we sent up a robot scavenger team and brought back the corpses, six of them."

The F.B.I. men fired. Blazing napalm sprayed toward the six bearded figures. They retreated, and then the flames touched them. The F.B.I. men saw the figures ignite, and then the sight was cut off. They could no longer see the six figures thrashing about, but they could hear them. It was not something they enjoyed hearing, but they remained, waiting and watching.

Scanlan kicked at the charred fragments with his foot. "Not easy to be sure," he said. "Possibly only five, here . . . but I didn't see any of them get away. They didn't have time." At the pressure of his foot a section of ash broke away; it fell into particles that still steamed and bubbled.

His companion, Wilks, stared down. New at this, he could not quite believe what he had seen the napalm do. "I—" he said. "Maybe I'll go back to the car," he muttered, starting off away from Scanlan.

"It's not over positively," Scanlan said, and then he saw the younger man's face. "Yes," he said, "you go sit down."

People were beginning to filter out onto the sidewalks. Peeping anxiously from doorways and windows.

"They got 'em!" a boy shouted excitedly. "They got the outer space spies!"

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Camera men snapped pictures. Curious people appeared on all sides, faces pale, eyes popping. Gaping down in wonder at the indiscriminate mass of charred ash.

His hands shaking, Wilks crept back into the car and shut the door after him. The radio buzzed, and he turned it off, not wanting to hear anything from it or say anything to it. At the doorway of the café the gray-coated Bureau men remained, conferring with Scanlan. Presently a number of them started off at a trot, around the side of the café and up the alley. Wilks watched them go. What a nightmare, he thought.

Coming over, Scanlan leaned down and put his head into the car. "Feel better?"

"Some." Presently he asked, "What's this—the twenty-second time?"

Scanlan said, "Twenty-first. Every couple of months . . . the same names, same men. I won't tell you that you'll get used to it. But at least it won't surprise you."

"I don't see any difference between them and us," Wilks said, speaking distinctly. "It was like burning up six human beings."

"No," Scanlan said. He opened the car door and got into the back seat, behind Wilks. "They only looked like six human beings. That's the whole point. They want to. They intend to. You know that Barton, Stone and Leon—"

"I know," he said. "Somebody or something that lives somewhere out there saw their ship go down, saw them die, and investigated. Before we got there. And got enough to go on, enough to give them what they needed. "But—" He gestured. "Isn't there anything else we can do with them?"

Scanlan said, "We don't know enough about them. Only this—sending in of imitations, again and again. Trying to sneak them past us." His face became rigid, despairing. "Are they crazy? Maybe they're so different no contact's possible. Do they think we're all named Leon and Merriweather and Parkhurst and Stone? That's the part that personally gets me down . . . Or maybe that's our chance, the fact that they don't understand we're individuals. Figure how much worse if sometime they made up a—whatever it is . . . a spore . . . a seed. But not like one of those poor miserable six who died on Mars—something we wouldn't know was an imitation . . ."

"They have to have a model," Wilks said.

One of the Bureau men waved, and Scanlan scrambled out of the car. He came back in a moment to Wilks. "They say there're only five," he said. "One got away; they think they saw him. He's crippled and not moving fast. The rest of us are going after him—you stay

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here, keep your eyes open." He strode off up the alley with the other Bureau men.

Wilks lit a cigarette and sat with his head resting on his arm. Mimicry . . . everybody terrified. But—

Had anybody really tried to make contact?

Two policemen appeared, herding people back out of the way. A third black Dodge, loaded with Bureau men, moved along at the curb, stopped, and the men got out.

One of the Bureau men, whom he did not recognize, approached the car. "Don't you have your radio on?"

"No," Wilks said. He snapped it back on.

"If you see one, do you know how to kill it?"

"Yes," he said.

The Bureau man went on to join his group.

If it was up to me, Wilks asked himself, what would I do? Try to find out what they want? Anything that looks so human, behaves in such a human way, must *feel* human . . . and if they—whatever they are—feel human, might they not become human, in time?

At the edge of the crowd of people, an individual shape detached itself and moved toward him. Uncertainly, the shape halted, shook its head, staggered and caught itself, and then assumed a stance like that of the people near it. Wilks recognized it because he had been trained to, over a period of months. It had gotten hold of different clothes, a pair of slacks, a shirt, but it had buttoned the shirt wrong, and one of its feet was bare. Evidently it did not understand the shoes. Or, he thought, maybe it was too dazed and injured.

As it approached him, Wilks raised his pistol and took aim at its stomach. They had been taught to fire there; he had fired, on the practice range, at chart after chart. Right in the midsection . . . bisect it, like a bug.

On its face the expression of suffering and bewilderment deepened as it saw him prepare to fire. It halted, facing him, making no move to escape. Now Wilks realized that it had been severely burned; probably it would not survive in any case.

"I have to," he said.

It stared at him, and then it opened its mouth and started to say something.

He fired.

Before it could speak, it had died. Wilks got out as it pitched over and lay beside the car.

I did wrong, he thought to himself as he stood looking down at it. I shot it because I was afraid. But I had to. Even if it was wrong. It came here to infiltrate us, imitating us so we won't recognize it. That's what we're told —we have to believe that they are

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plotting against us, are inhuman, and will never be more than that.

Thank God, he thought. It's over.

And then he remembered that it wasn't . . .

It was a warm summer day, late in July.

The ship landed with a roar, dug across a plowed field, tore through a fence, a shed, and came finally to rest in a gulley.

Silence.

Parkhurst got shakily to his feet. He caught hold of the safety rail. His shoulder hurt. He shook his head, dazed.

"We're down," he said. His voice rose with awe and excitement. "We're down!"

"Help me up," Captain Stone gasped. Barton gave him a hand.

Leon sat wiping a trickle of blood from his neck. The interior of the ship was a shambles. Most of the equipment was smashed and strewn about.

Vecchi made his way unsteadily to the hatch. With trembling fingers he began to unscrew the heavy bolts.

"Well," Barton said, "we're back."

"I can hardly believe it," Merriweather murmured. The hatch came loose and they swung it quickly aside. "It doesn't seem possible. Good old Earth."

"Hey listen," Leon gasped, as he clambered down to the ground. "Somebody get the camera."

"That's ridiculous," Barton said, laughing.

"Get it!" Stone yelled.

"Yes, get it," Merriweather said. "Like we planned, if we ever got back. An historic record, for the school books."

Vecchi rummaged around among the debris. "It's sort of banged up," he said. He held up the dented camera.

"Maybe it'll work anyhow," Parkhurst said, panting with exertion as he followed Leon outside. "How're we going to take all six of us? Somebody has to snap the shutter."

"I'll set it for time," Stone said, taking the camera and adjusting the knobs. "Everybody line up." He pushed a button, and joined the others.

The six bearded, tattered men stood by their smashed ship, as the camera ticked. They gazed across the green countryside, awed and suddenly silent. They glanced at each other, eyes bright.

"We're back!" Stone cried. "We're back!"

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Saint Nick and Old Nick would seem to be an odd combination—but a man who wants there to be a Santa Claus just for him has clearly got to have unusual help in achieving his ends. Alternatively, of course, he might settle for less succulent ends. . . .

SANTA CLAUSE

by Robert F. Young

"STATE YOUR BUSINESS," THE ADversary said, when the smoke had cleared away. "I haven't got all night!"

Ross swallowed. He hadn't really thought the pentagram would work. He debated on whether to stand up in the Inimical Presence, or to go on sitting behind his desk. He decided on the latter procedure: the Adversary, he was sure, wouldn't be in the least impressed by protocol.

"Well?"

Ross swallowed again. "I — I want there to be a Santa Claus."

"I see. . . . For everyone, or just for yourself?"

"Just for myself, naturally," Ross said. "I wouldn't stand to gain a thing if everyone cashed in on the deal. Why, there'd be inflation as sure as Ford made green Edsels."

"You've got a point there." The Adversary scratched the back of his neck reflectively with the tip of his tail. "And I must say, your request is original. No one ever thought about *that* angle before. . . . There are considerations, of course."

"I expected there would be," Ross said.

"Don't be in such a hurry to show off your cynicism. By 'considerations' I mean that I can't subdivide childhood fantasy. If you want there to be a Santa Claus, you'll have to take everything that goes with him—and live by the rules."

An octet of reindeer pulling a red sleigh pranced through Ross's head. Imagination wasn't one of his strong points. "Sounds all right to me," he said.

"Fine!" The Adversary pulled a mimeographed contract from beneath his robe, punctured a vein in his wrist, and filled in the pertinent blank spaces. He handed it to Ross. "You'll find the terms generous, I think."

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"I doubt it," Ross said, running his eyes down the page, paying particular attention to the fine print. Abruptly he gasped. "What's this here? For *life*?"

"That's right. I'm waiving the time limit in this case. Better sign before I change my mind."

Ross took the pen, punctured one of his own wrist veins, and dashed off his name. "But *why*?" he asked.

The Adversary leered. "You'll find out," he said. There was the usual puff of smoke, the usual odor of brimstone, followed by the usual empty space....

Ross had fun writing his letter to Santa Claus that year. He came right to the point. *Dear Santa,* he wrote: *Please send me a 1959 Cadillac de Ville, a beautiful 40-24-40 Mansfield, 52 cases of top-shelf liquor, 365 cases of Schlitz, a year's subscription to* Whisper— The list was quite imposing, and he didn't really think he'd get *all* he'd asked for; but even if he only got the first three items, he felt that his after-life would have been invested profitably.

Santa, however, came through with everything. On Christmas morn, Ross found himself the possessor of—in addition to the aforementioned items — a completely stocked deepfreeze; a solid chrome refrigerator; 3 gin mills; a Buick-red living room suite; a terra cotta bedroom suite; the complete works of the Marquis de Sade; a 24" blond TV console; a *Sputnik* wall clock with a little dog that popped out every hour and barked what time it was; an electric organ, together with a book entitled, *You Too Can Play The Organ—In Six Easy Lessons!*; a chrome bathroom ensemble; a uranium mine; a large economy-size Laurence Welk record album; 365 Brooks Brothers shirts; a woodworker's do-it-yourself kit; a south sea island; a deluxe edition of the current best-seller, *What's in it for Me?*; 6 gross of Miltowns; an electric train; a *Sputnik* cigarette lighter that went *beep beep!* when you flicked it; a chalet in the Swiss Alps; and a solid gold bottle opener.

The Cadillac did wonders for his ego. For the first time in his life, he felt like a whole man. As for the Mansfield, whose name was Candace, he took one look at her and proposed, she was that irresistible. She said yes, of course —he'd specified in a P.S. that she should fall in love with him at first sight—and that very afternoon they were married by an out-of-state justice of the peace.

Back in the apartment, Ross took his Christmas present in his arms. This, he thought, kissing her, was worth all the empty Christmas stockings he'd ever gotten up to. And it was only the *first* Santa Claus Christmas. The thought of all the things he could

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ask for on the forthcoming ones made his head swim, and he made a mental note to start work on his next list early, so that he'd be less liable to forget anything.

Presently Candy drew away. "Good night, darling," she said.

"I'll 'good night' you!" Ross said, grabbing her and kissing her again.

She responded as a good blonde should—up to a point. When he passed that point, she disengaged herself and headed for the bedroom. Ross followed. She paused in the doorway. "Good night, darling," she said again, and closed the door in his face. There was a tantalizing little click as the lock slipped into position.

Ross stared disbelievingly at the pink panels. Then he started pounding on them. When Candy opened the door a crack, he roared: "What in hell's the matter with you? This is our *wedding* night!"

"I know it is, darling. Haven't I let you kiss me twice already?"

"Sure you let me kiss you twice. What of it? I didn't marry you just so I could kiss you!"

She gasped at him. "Then why on earth *did* you marry me?"

Before he had a chance to answer he found himself confronted by the pink panels again. He resumed pounding, but this time he got no response. After a while his hands started to hurt, and he desisted.

He went over to the liquor cabinet and poured himself four fingers of I. W. Harper's. He gulped them down, poured four more. He gulped them down, too. Suddenly he became aware that someone—or something—was tapping on the window. He stepped across the room and threw up the sash. A small, pale man was sitting in a bo's'n's seat, just beyond the sill. He had a silver pail in one hand and a putty knife in the other.

"This is a hell of a time for maintenance!" Ross said. "Just what is it you're doing, anyway?"

"Why I'm putting frost on your window, of course," the pale man said. "What did you think I'd be doing on a cold night like this?"

For a moment Ross couldn't speak, he was so furious. Then: "What's your name?" he demanded. "I'm going to report you to the management!"

"The management, ha ha," the pale man said. "The management, ha ha!"

"I'll 'ha ha' you if you don't tell me your name!"

"Why I'm Jack Frost, you idiot. Who else would be putting frost on your window?"

Ross stared. "Jack *Frost!*"

The pale man nodded. "Himself."

"For Pete's sake, d'you think I'm a kid? There's no such person as Jack Frost."

"Isn't there, now. First thing

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you know, you'll be telling me there's no such person as Santa Claus!"

Ross slammed the window shut. He returned to the liquor cabinet and poured himself four more fingers of I. W., then he went over and sat sullenly on the sofa.

He tried to think. What was it the Adversary had said? That he couldn't subdivide childhood fantasy? That in order to make Santa Claus real, he had to make everything that went with Santa Claus real, too?

Jack Frost?

Well why not? Wasn't Jack Frost an integral part of childhood fantasy?

Nonsense, Ross thought. I'll be damned if I'll believe it!

He tossed off his drink and threw the empty glass into the fireplace. He stared glumly at the bedroom door. Suddenly he had a feeling that there was someone standing behind him, and he turned angrily. Sure enough, there *was* someone—a tall, lanky individual wearing a white cowboy suit, armed with a set of silver six-guns, and carrying a golden guitar. A halo, like a circular fluorescent tube, scintillated over his sombrero, a chrome star, with the letters "G.A." stamped on it, glittered on his breast, and a pair of pink wings sprouted from his shoulders.

Ross sighed. "All right," he said wearily. "Who are *you*?"

The winged cowboy struck a throbbing golden chord. "I'm your G. A.," he drawled.

"My *what*?"

"Your Guardian Angel."

"Whoever heard of a Guardian Angel wearing a cowboy suit and carrying a guitar!"

"Got to keep up with the times, podner. I'd look a mite silly, wouldn't I, wearin' a white robe and carryin' a harp?"

Ross almost said that he looked a mite silly, anyway. But he didn't. For some reason he didn't feel much like talking. He looked around the room a little desperately, noticed that there were still a few fingers remaining in the I. W. bottle. After chug-a-lugging them, he returned foggily to the sofa and lay down. The G. A. got blankets from somewhere and tucked him in for the night.

After a while the Sandman came in, carrying a little red pail, and threw sand in his eyes.

After a week of dead-end kisses and arguments that got him nowhere, of nightly visits by Jack Frost and the Sandman, Ross was ready to tie on a good one. The season was appropriate, and New Year's Eve found him, Candy, and the G. A. ensconced in a dim corner of one of the gin mills Santa had brought him.

Candy, as might have been expected, drank like a bird. Ross was disgusted. Next time he put a

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Mansfield on his Christmas list, he told himself bitterly, he'd be sure to specify what *kind* of a Mansfield. If the old boy in the red flannel suit didn't understand the facts of life, it was high time he learned.

It was a wretched evening—from Ross's point of view. Candy, though, seemed to enjoy herself—in a milktoast kind of way—and the G. A. had a ball. He strummed his guitar incessantly and sang song after song in a treacly voice, and every so often he got up and danced around in a little circle, employing a peculiar sideways step. The fact that no one saw or heard him, save Ross and Candy, didn't seem to bother him a bit.

Around 11 o'clock, Ross noticed an old man with a scythe wandering among the tables. No one paid any attention to him, or, for that matter, seemed to see him. For a while Ross was puzzled; then, at 12 on the dot, the old man walked out and a rotund little boy, wearing nothing but a sash, walked in.

"Nuts!" Ross said. "Let's go."

Jack Frost was merrily at work on the window when they entered the apartment, and Ross glimpsed the Sandman lurking in a shadowy corner. The G. A. went over and started making up the sofa. Candy slipped out of her pastel mink and stood provocatively in the middle of the room.

"I'm ready for my good-night kiss," she said.

In mid-January, after a long, drawn-out battle with his G. A., Ross visited a divorce lawyer. "I want my marriage annulled," he said.

"Calm down a little," the lawyer said. "We'll get it annulled for you—if you can show sufficient cause."

"Cause! Why, I can show enough cause to annul twenty marriages! My wife will only let me kiss her!"

"That's no justification for an annulment—or a divorce, either. What do you expect her to do?"

Ross felt his face burn. "What do you think I expect her to do?"

"I can't imagine."

"Look, I'm in no mood for a hard time. I'll break it down for you just once, and I'll be damned if I'll draw you a picture. When *you* kiss your wife, does she run away from you and lock you out of the bedroom?"

"Naturally not! But that has nothing to do with you. You're different."

"*Why* am I different?"

The lawyer looked bewildered. "I—I don't exactly know," he said. "You—you just are."

"Oh for Pete's sake!" Ross said. He stomped out of the room, slammed the door behind him.

Five divorce lawyers later, he gave up.

Late in February, Candy started knitting. Little things. She

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dropped her eyes demurely when Ross confronted her. "I'm going to have a baby," she said.

For a while, Ross couldn't speak. The occasion demanded a careful choice of words, and it was some time before he found the one he wanted. It filled the bill nicely:

"*Whose?*" he said.

She stared at him. "Why yours, of course. You're my husband, aren't you?"

"I guess that's what you'd call me."

"Then what a silly question to ask! You don't think I'd let anybody else kiss me, do you?"

Ross sighed. "No, I guess you wouldn't at that," he said.

He didn't really believe she was going to have a baby, of course. But he decided to humor her. As the weeks passed, she was happier than he'd ever seen her before, and her knitting, pointless or not, seemed to give her a direction in life that had previously been lacking.

He continued to humor her even after she started buying maternity dresses. If she wanted to retreat completely from reality, it was all right with him. He had to admit, though, that she *was* putting on weight; however, that wasn't too surprising when you considered how much she ate.

The G. A. continued to hang around, strumming his guitar, singing, and polishing his six-guns. Jack Frost was on hand almost every evening, with his putty knife and pail, and the Sandman never missed a night. But, while the situation was predominantly dark, it did have its brighter aspects.

For instance, early in March Ross had to have a tooth pulled, and remembered, when he saw the dentist about to drop it into the waste can, that teeth, in childhood fantasy, had a monetary value. So he asked the dentist for the tooth back, and that night he placed it under his pillow. Sure enough, next morning a shiny coin reposed where it had been. Hmm, he thought...

That afternoon he visited a nearby novelty store and bought two dozen sets of toy false teeth at 25¢ apiece, and that night, before he went to bed on the sofa, he put one of the sets under his pillow. Twenty teeth, at the current rate of 50¢ apiece, he reasoned, should bring him a total of $10.00—if the Tooth Fairy fell for the scheme. The Tooth Fairy did, and next morning Ross was $9.75 to the good. He was in business again.

And then there was the time on Chocolate Rabbit Sunday when he talked the Easter Bunny into leaving golden eggs instead of the conventional hard-boiled variety. He really hauled in the loot that day—and if he'd had any kind of

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wife at all, she'd have fallen all over him and given him anything he wanted. Candy didn't. She just kept right on knitting, and when 10 o'clock came, stood up and said: "Well aren't you going to kiss me good night, dear?"

June, and girls in summer dresses . . . Ross started looking around. No man, he told himself, had ever had more justification. But the G. A. didn't see it that way at all, and Ross had no sooner made his first pass when he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder and heard a sonorous voice in his ear:

"The dirtiest critter riding the plains is the critter who steps out on his missus. I aim to keep you clean, podner. Clean. Y'hear me?"

"Go home and get up a game of pinochle with the Sandman and the Tooth Fairy," Ross said. "I'm busy."

"Clean, podner. Clean," the G. A. repeated, and to prove he meant business, he picked Ross up, carried him home, and put him to bed.

Ross stared miserably at the ceiling. What did you do, he asked himself, when the wife you'd got for Christmas turned out to be a dud, and the Guardian Angel you'd got along with her turned out to have the morality of a Zane Grey range rider?

Answer (general): you ordered another wife.

Answer (specific): you wrote, *Dear Santa: Please send me a new wife,* and by so phrasing your request, automatically guaranteed the cancellation of the first wife when the second arrived.

Certainly, in the world of childhood fantasy, a man couldn't have *two* wives!

Ross began to feel better. He started to work on his Santa Claus letter the next day. He worked on it all summer and into the fall, dedicated to the proposition that Santa Claus wasn't going to make a fool out of him two times running. No one bothered him except the Sandman, who persisted in throwing sand in his eyes the minute he began to nod. (Jack Frost had stopped coming around with the advent of warm weather.)

On Halloween, he interrupted his work long enough to steal a besom from a feeble old witch, to catch a crippled leprechaun and make it reveal its treasure's hiding place, and to talk two teen-age brownies into doing his housework for the forthcoming fantasy-year. But the next day he was right back at it again.

Late one November night he heard a tapping on the window. He had just entered item no. 6002 on his list and was debating on whether to treat himself to a brandy or a Scotch and soda. Candy had retired early, saying that she wasn't feeling well.

When the tapping continued,

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he got up and went over to the window. It was a cold night, and at first he thought that Jack Frost had come back, and he raised the sash, intending to give the pale man a piece of his mind. Then he saw that it wasn't Jack Frost after all.

It was the Stork.

It was also the last straw. Ross slammed the window shut, ran over to his desk, got out pencil, paper and ruler, and went to work on another pentagram.

The Adversary, when he appeared some minutes later, was his usual leering self. "Well," he said, a little tiredly, "what is it this time?"

"I want there *not* to be a Santa Claus," Ross said, "and I want there *not* to be a Sandman and a Jack Frost and a G. A. But most of all, I want there *not* to be a Stork!"

"I see . . . For everyone, or just for yourself?"

"Just for myself, naturally. It's *my* soul I'm selling. . . . Besides, they don't exist for everyone."

"They do in a way," the Adversary said, "an eventuality which underlines the 'considerations' I mentioned during our first meeting. My inability to subdivide childhood fantasy applies to my eliminating it as well as to my materializing it—and my eliminating it would involve taking away not only its present reality, but the normal residue remaining from your childhood as well. To accomplish that, I'd have to go all the way back to your formative years and alter your original attitude. There could be complications—"

"You're not getting through," Ross said.

The Adversary flicked his tail in exasperation. "All I'm trying to bring out," he said, "is the fact that, while the concept of the Stork may seem ridiculous to you now, a long time ago it made a phase of your life bearable and enabled you to grow up retaining the illusions on which the love-life of your particular culture is based."

"I don't need illusions for *my* love-life," Ross said. "All I need is good old reality."

"Then you shall have it!" The Adversary produced another mimeographed contract, punctured a vein, and began filling in the pertinent blank spaces. He spoke each word aloud as he wrote it down: "Signing of this agreement invalidates the original agreement . . . elimination from life of signer all belief in any and all aspects of childhood fantasy . . . term of agreement: life."

"Again?" Ross asked.

"I'm in another generous mood," the Adversary said, handing him the pen and the contract.

Ross hesitated a moment. For some reason, the life clause failed

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to reassure him this time. Then he thought of Candy sleeping virginally beyond the impenetrable pink panels, of the Stork waiting outside the window. Hurriedly, he punctured one of his own veins and scrawled his name. He handed the pen and the contract back.

"See you later," the Adversary said.

When the smoke had cleared away, Ross looked around the room. The corner where the Sandman usually lurked was empty. He glanced over his shoulder: the G. A. was gone. He listened: the tapping on the window had ceased.

He looked contemplatively at the bedroom door.

For some reason the pink panels left him cold.

But he got up, anyway, and walked over and knocked. "Come in," a warm voice said. "Come in, darling."

He reached out, touched the knob. He knew that this time the door wouldn't be locked. Suddenly he thought of Candy sprawled on the sweaty bed, shameless, with vast naked udders . . . Loathing rose up in his throat, almost choked him. His hand fell away from the knob and he turned and ran from the apartment.

Filthy creature! he thought. He hated her so much he couldn't stand it.

He hated her almost as much as he hated his mother.

Coming Next Month . . .

A special issue, featuring two short novelets:

What Rough Beast? by Damon Knight
(concerning a man with unusual talents, passing through a world that wasn't ready for him yet—or was past being ready . . .)

Death Cannot Wither, by Judith Merril
(about a woman, a ghost, and their surprisingly potent love affair)

plus a number of other delicacies, including stories by Eleazar Lipsky, Idris Seabright, Jane Rice, George P. Elliott, and Joel Townsley Rogers.

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"There are lands with riches such as you have never dreamed of," said the stranger, "all to be won by those who bear arms for the king...."

Meeting of Relations

by John Collier

FOLD AFTER FOLD OF HILLS, already tawny with summer, encircled the valley where the Oxus flowed between wide meadows of knee-high grass and nodding flowers. The afternoon was as golden as an afternoon can be. It had that timeless, still and classic quality which insists the world has been thus, and will be thus, forever.

The herdsmen, whose cattle grazed the lower slopes, were gathered under the dark levels of a cedar tree, from whose reddish trunk a little bronze oozed into the black-green shade. The deep silence of cedar shade was invaded by no sound except for the sweet and brittle note of the cicada, which seemed to enter the silence without destroying it.

The herdsmen were not talking. They were looking across the valley at the long track that led into the hills to the west. Along this track the figure of a single man was advancing, and had already grown from the size of a fly to the size of a heron, and now he was approaching the ford. There seemed nothing to fear in a man who came alone and on foot. Nevertheless, they continued to watch him.

Soon he had waded through the shallows, and had started upon the uphill track that led past the tree under which they were sitting. As he approached they saw he was not dressed as they were, but wore a headdress of white cloth, which was banded low on his forehead, and flowed down his back almost to his heels. It was impossible to guess at his age.

He saw the herdsmen and came straight towards their tree. "Brothers," he said, "I have come a long way. Allow me to rest among you."

This, in the world of that day, was an implied request for refreshment, and soon he was provided with a bowl of milk, and a

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piece of the coarse bread which was the staple food of the herdsmen.

"You have come a long way?" asked the senior among them.

"I have travelled more days," said he, "than there are cattle in your herds. And you have many cattle."

"Your speech is strange in our ears," said the other. "Have you come from beyond the place where the sun sinks, where there is nothing but darkness?"

"That," said one of the boys, frightened, "that is the land of the dead."

"No, brother," said the stranger. "That is farther than you think. Out there there are still countries where the sun shines. It seems a man might journey forever."

"Is yours the land where the gods walk among men?" asked the other boy, "and have heads like those of hawks and of dogs?"

"No, though I have heard of that country," said the man. "But I have never seen it."

"Have you heard of the closed garden," asked another, "where the serpent guards the fruit of gold?"

"I have heard of it, brother," said the stranger.

"You are weary in the spirit," said the senior herdsmen, after a silence that had come unbidden upon them. "What do you seek that you travel so far and take no rest?"

"I go east, brother," said the stranger. "I have heard of a far land where the strong men do no labor, but bear arms for the king."

"Are there so many wolves?" asked one of the boys. "Are there other beasts that prey on the herds?"

"No," said the stranger, "but there are other pastures to be won from those who hold them. There are lands with riches such as you have never dreamed of, all to be won by those who bear arms for the king."

"No one bears arms for our king," said one of the men. "He offers our sacrifice. He discovers when the herds shall move from the hillsides to the plain, but for the rest he is one of ourselves. Why should we bear arms for him?"

"To live well," said the stranger. "What is better than when strong men, like a band of brothers, set out to make themselves great upon the earth, and win wide spaces for their fields and their flocks and their herds?"

"To do that," said the oldest man, "they must leave untended the cattle they have already."

"What of it, brother," said the stranger, "what of it, so long as they have weapons in their hands? There are always more lands to be won."

"It is true," said one boy to the other.

"But if a people is small?" said

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one of the men. "There is, perhaps here, a small people, and yonder a people that is great. It seems it must go ill with the small peoples."

"Then they must yield to the greater," said the stranger, "and lean upon them, and join with them, and do their will."

"The will of strangers!" said the senior.

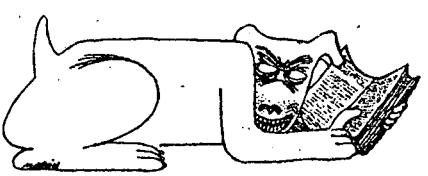
"Why not, brother?" said the stranger. "It is no dishonor for a small people to lean upon a stronger brother."

"Brother is a word you use often," said the old man. "You are not of our people, yet you call us by that name."

"Why not?" said the stranger. "All men are brothers."

"Yet," said the old man, "since we are not accustomed to speak that way, tell us the name you bear in the country of your birth."

"Cain," said the stranger.



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This tale of the first landing on Venus, and the rather unusual events that followed, has much of the dry, ironic bite of Mr. Elliott's popular Sandra *(F&SF, Oct. '57). The nature of the love involved, on the other hand, is quite different....The first of two (completely separate) stories about the true nature of the native Venerean—and possibly of man.*

Invasion of the Planet of Love

by George P. Elliott

ONE THING SURPRISED US ABOUT the stormy surface of Venus, and that pleasantly—the temperature. It was as low as 10 degrees Centigrade at the poles and not over 70 at the equator. We saw several active volcanoes, and no signs of water. It was in the southern temperate zone, sheltered by a range of mountains about 20,000 feet high, and a couple of hours ahead of the nearest tempest, that we finally landed. Rossi and Bertel, armored and cautious, began to explore the vicinity of the ship; Dr. Pound and I covered them with depressor-gun and solvator.

There was nothing to discover but granite. A mountain of granite, a plain of granite, granite boulders, seams of granite. And granite dust, everywhere granite dust. We got back into the ship and moved on ahead of the approaching storm. We stopped in the middle of a plain as vast as Africa. Granite.

After 72 hours of fruitless exploration we were all in a state of acute disappointment, especially Rossi, who, being the expert on this part of our expedition, seemed to feel slightly apologetic at the state of affairs on the second planet. Bertel went off to sleep, and I, as I always do in such a case, kept eating too much. Dr. Pound no longer prayed; he even gave up that smile which it has taken three centuries of Anglican conquest to breed; he sat glued to his periscope peering at granite.

For at the back of our minds was the dread of failure. Five expeditions to Mars had failed: they

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had approached, begun to land, and had never been heard from again. So we had been sent to Venus, and we too were failing. Though we had arrived and though we could probably return in safety, yet we were failing: we had not found that which it was necessary for us to find.

We were out of communication with Earth because of the tempests; I think we were all glad of it, for had it been otherwise we would have waited till the 300th hour, as we were supposed to, to use our last and most desperate resource. We had 500 hours in all; if we stayed longer than that we would be dangerously far from Earth for safe return.

We could not use the crater of one of the extinct volcanoes as we had hoped, because the craters were all filled with sand. We agreed to do it in a temperate zone, and near a mountain. We returned to the place where we had first landed. A standard Venus supertempest was on when we got there. Rossi said that would be fine for clearing the gross radioactivity fast. We dropped the bomb at the 82nd hour; at the 96th hour we returned, fully protected, expecting to find merely a few more variations on the granite theme. And found instead, we thought, what we had been looking for: natural resources and rational beings . . . riches and enemies.

The cavern which the bomb had scooped out was hundreds of feet in depth. In it were evidences of many mineral deposits, including, Rossi said, a large vein of gold and considerable pitchblende. But his enthusiasm at the minerals and water was lost presently at our discovery of the evidences of life—burrows issuing into this cavern. Not many and not large—about four feet in diameter—but regular and clearly artificial.

"There!" cried Dr. Pound, his eyes at his periscope. "There! One of the holes over there disappeared!"

It was of course quite dark in there, and he was not the most reliable observer imaginable, but he swore that as he had been looking at one of the openings it had closed up. In less than ten seconds, it simply became not there, but a part of the wall of granite. Sand could not have done it. We armored ourselves, and got out of the ship.

We approached the nearest hole slowly. Rossi carried a solvator, Bertel a Murdlegatt, I two depressors, and Dr. Pound, who was old-fashioned, a submachine gun in one hand and a cross in the other. We reached the hole safely, and saw nothing, as far as our lights penetrated, but a sort of tunnel dug for four-foot miners. The air issuing from it was relatively cool.

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We started, and turned around. There was a scraping sound going on behind us somewhere. We could hear its clear and special noise under the echo and howl of the blasting winds outside. And then, as Dr. Pound had said, the entrance of a hole, which none of us was looking at at the moment but which all of us knew had been there, suddenly was not there. We ran over to where it had been, and found what at first seemed to be a sandstone plug in the entrance. But Rossi, investigating it, found it to be a highly intricate, light-metal filter or screen. He got rid of it with his solvator turned to 7.7, and we entered the tunnel, stooping.

It was not quite pitch black in the tunnel – we don't know yet how they managed this—though it was very dark all the same; you couldn't see your hand in front of your face, but you could tell you were *not* seeing it, which is more than you can tell in pitch darkness. There were no irregularities in the surface of the tunnel and no turnings, so we saved our lights. We walked a very long way, always slightly uphill.

Dr. Pound, the last in line, said "Stop!" in that tone of voice which stands the hair up on the back of your neck. It seemed to be silent in the tunnel at first, just as it had seemed to be black; but presently we knew that there was a padding sound, which was more than the beat of our hearts in our ears, coming from behind us. (How could anything have got behind us?) I snapped on my light.

Twenty feet away, blinking in the sudden glare, stood a bent, large-eyed, grinning, two-legged creature. He was nude, his entire body seemed to be without hair or wrinkles, and he had the white color of underground life; he came towards us with claw-hands outstretched; he was clearly more like a human than like anything else. Dr. Pound warned him to stop, with word and cross, but the Venerean did not stop. His claws were very sharp; he grinned too much.

Dr. Pound shot him down at five feet. We watched him clutch his belly and shriek in pain; but when he was clearly about to die, his features relaxed into an expression of peace, and his last act was a smile of joy for Dr. Pound; he died with that expression on his face. Dr. Pound knelt, made the sign of the cross over the corpse, offered an ejaculation for the soul it might have had; and we went on our way.

It was not three minutes till we saw light at the end of this tunnel; a dim pinpoint far ahead. Then the pinpoint became obscured; we heard a calling sound; another Venerean was approaching, no doubt to investigate the noise. I blinded him with my light; Rossi solvated him (at 2.1); we stepped

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over the puddle, and approached the entrance cautiously. The tunnel permitted only two of us at a time to look out; Rossi and I crept forward on hands and knees, guns ready, till we could see into a great cavern.

There were warmth and moisture in the cavern — exactly the right condition for going about unclothed as the Venereans did— and it was so large we could not see the opposite side of it. The sides were sheer and high, there was soil on the floor, and the huge stalactites covering the dome glowed where they hung. From our vantage point some hundred feet above the floor, we could see a profusion of pale vegetation and large numbers of the pale little people. They were doing something or other—jumping about and hugging each other, disappearing under the leaves, calling in guttural voices.

"What's going on down there?" I asked Rossi.

He shrugged. "They're lunatics. Dancing lunatics."

But Bertel and Dr. Pound were tugging at our shirts and whispering to us to give them a turn. We gave way to them.

Both of them were so excited as to be incautious in their zeal. They craned their necks out and began arguing in intense, carrying whispers that rose to a considerable pitch.

"There's no reason," said Bertel, "to suppose any eccentricity in what they are doing."

"Come," said Dr. Pound, "look at them, man."

"What do we know of their motives? We are merely guessing what we would mean if we were doing that."

Dr. Pound stared at him with amazement.

"And what," he said, "do you psychologists ever do, with primitives especially?"

"Bah," said Bertel, avoiding the question. "If these fellows are human, I'd say they're pre-sapiens. Observe—"

"No!" said Dr. Pound. "I detect a pattern in their movements. I am willing to wager that this represents a dance propitiating the gods for the terrible explosion of our bomb."

"Not a bad idea," said Bertel. "But to me it looks too random. I'd say they may be seriously disturbed by the effects of our bomb. The inner ear maybe."

The argument did not pause, but I ceased to pay any attention to it. I began speculating on what my task would be if these Venereans did turn out to be equivalent to human pre-literates. I had helped develop the Kräse system of reducing primitive languages to a sort of Basic that greatly facilitates education. There had been a couple of Brazilian tribes whose languages seemed not to respond to the Kräse method, and

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I was very anxious to see what I could do with the Venereans.

"Come on," I said to the wranglers, "how are we ever going to get down there?"

Rossie laughed. "It'll take a ladder to civilize those babies."

We could see that our tunnel opened, like all the others in sight, a hundred feet sheer above the floor, without paths or mechanisms of any visible sort for getting us down. But even as we watched, we saw gliding among the stalactites, like a launch on a calm lake, the means of transportation: a sort of shallow skiff floating through the air. There were two Venereans in it; they directed it towards another tunnel opening, warped it into position and then pushed their cargo into the tunnel. It was a plug such as we had solvated. One of the men disappeared with the plug, pushing it, and the other sailed away. We did not know what to do.

Our tactics and strategy had been laid out for us in complete detail years before; if we found intelligent beings (as we obviously had) we were to isolate a small number of them, communicate with them so as to learn as much as possible about their life-system and educability and the planet's natural resources, and be absolutely honest about our intentions though not about our powers; but above all, we were to *TRUST NO ONE.*

Our problem therefore was: how to get to the floor without trusting ourselves to one of these little boatmen? Bertel suggested that we hail one, get him to teach us how to operate the boat, and then throw him overboard. But the rest of us agreed that that was too risky a procedure. We could see no alternative to trusting one at least for the one trip. And so, with grave misgivings, the next time a boat approached to deposit its load, we shouted and waved till the boatman saw us and came towards us.

He came smiling and open-armed up to the mouth of our tunnel, making little throat-noises, not at all astonished at our appearance. Before we could make him realize that we were repelling his advances, he had touched us a number of times trying to embrace us. But finally he got the point; smiling no more, he let us enter his boat apart from him. We pointed straight down, and in graceful spirals we descended.

The boat was metal and had no visible controls in it. The Venerean seemed to do nothing to guide it. We were all mystified (and still are) at how it worked. Dr. Pound, who could be very embarrassing, painfully so, half-muttered that maybe it was only a grain of faith that moved the boat. I think Rossi at that point would have traded Dr. Pound for a shot of good Scotch; I know I

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would have. When we landed I depressed the boatman, so as to insure our safe return.

Bertel, who had been keeping his eye on the floor of the cavern, called to us to be prepared against an assault. The Venereans were capering towards us by the score, leaping and chortling as they came. There was no natural safeguard of any sort for us, only the flaccid, pale-green, humid plants with their huge, ginkgo-like leaves. And there was no time—the Venereans were approaching from every direction, with no sign of hesitation. They were armed, some of them, with what looked like shovels and hoes.

With our backs toward the cavern wall, forming a semicircle against their semicircle, we shouted at them to stop, but they did not stop. Then we opened fire. We must have eliminated fifty in the first round, but I do not think the others behind them understood what had happened for they kept on coming. Again we opened fire—all our weapons were effective on them. Again. And this third time the remainder stopped at about fifty paces.

All but a child, who came toddling on towards us by himself, beating his little claws together and chortling at us. His mother came clucking after him. Dr. Pound shoved him over with the point of his submachine gun; the mother picked him up and comforted him by giving him suck; then, smiling, she extended an arm with the brutal claw at the end of it (*TRUST NO ONE*) and leaned at Dr. Pound. He shot her down; like the first one he had shot, she died smiling at him. All the other people ran away. We decided that they were afraid of the noise; the baby, paying no attention to his fallen mother, ran after them with his claws over his ears, wailing his guttural loss.

We solvated the dead and resuscitated some of the depressed, and set about the long tedious process of safeguarding ourselves, communicating with them, and exploring the physical resources of their world. Rossi went sailing off with the boatman and the Murdlegatt for 150 hours, and came back with some mighty tall tales about mineral deposits. I managed to establish what seemed to be telepathic rapport with the Venereans, though we were never sure how they understood us. Dr. Pound had no success whatever in his attempts to convert them, and Bertel is still trying to make coherent sense of their thought-ways from such psychognosis as he was able to perform.

However, for reasons of National Security, I am not permitted in this public narrative to enter upon a detailed discussion of any of these aspects of our expedition. What I can say is that

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this gusty, populous planet contains such wealth as can be expressed only by statistics, and an enemy that isn't worth a good epidemic of measles. We did not even discover to our satisfaction whether they are highly enough evolved to be able to learn the advantages of having books and clothes and machines and wars—whether, in short, they can be brought up to a decent level of civilization.

It can be said that for over 200 hours we subjected a dozen random but obviously typical specimens of Venerean man to every experiment which ingenuity had devised beforehand and which necessity imposed upon us now. I would point to my eyes—they had eyes like ours—and then my mind (and Bertel's and Dr. Pound's also) would fill at their suggestion with the image of a chain of lakes under a clear sky or of a garden of roses in bloom. I would rub my skin and pinch it, and my mind would be occupied with the sensation of a warm bath or of fresh smooth sheets. I pointed at my belly, and was made to think of roast turkey (there are of course no turkeys in Venus); at my ears, and heard birds at their dawn-singing (no birds, no dawns). It was as though they had once lived in a world like ours and had been driven underground by earlier invaders, preserving among themselves the memories of that pleasant life. Bertel, who is more realistic about it, says they worked on our emotions, and our own minds formed the specific images. When I found myself weeping after I had pointed at my fingers, Bertel said it indicated their pity for our not having claws. Sometimes we were suffused with the desire to embrace them in friendship (we had to depress them once in order that we might conquer this impulse); and sometimes our minds were overcome with sexual images so voluptuous and indecent, though never perverted, that it was as much as we could do to keep from solvating the whole batch of them.

They were either incredibly simple-minded, or else extremely clever. Indeed, if they had been of the species Homo sapiens, Bertel would have called them dangerously neurotic. For nothing we could do aroused their hostility; or, to put it perhaps more accurately, no matter what we did they would give no indication of their hostility. They cried when we beat them. They learned to run when we chased. One we starved; he just died. Another we blindfolded and hobbled and stuck head first into a hole; after struggling for a while, he seemed to croon to himself till we pulled him out.

It was Rossi, after he had returned from his expedition, who

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suggested we torture one of them. I was in favor of it, though Dr. Pound opposed, for it seems to me you can discover a good deal about the level of a being's culture by the way he handles pain; one of a low order merely cries or endures it, whereas a highly developed type will be able to turn his pain to some good use.

We began by betraying him. We would proffer him friendship and love, which he would always be happy to accept, and then as he was all ready to receive it we would hurt him, slap him or knock him down. Again and again and again, and he never learned. We overwhelmed him with hostile thoughts; I think they projected successfully for he seemed to feel a sort of bewilderment and pain at them. We submitted him to physical torture, and then a monstrous thing happened. At first he cried in pain, but shortly he seemed to understand that this treatment was what was in store for him and he *smiled* at us. Very dimly, but very certainly, as we burned the soles of his feet or gouged his eyes out or twisted his arm off, we felt ourselves invaded with his tenderness and affection; in me it took the form of wanting him to forgive me.

We were baffled and defeated; for how can you expect to civilize beings so unable to handle pain as these smilers? What worthwhile accomplishments could be expected from such fellows? We were about to give up when the greatest danger of all threatened us.

We were knocked to our knees.

We did not know how or whence, but suddenly we were knocked to our knees by an onslaught of joy. In all four of us it became a surpassing joy to breathe the oxygen from our capsules, it was new and strange to feel the backs of our hands thrill against their gauntlets, we liked intensely being on our knees and being aghast at ourselves. I think Dr. Pound was right: it was awe we felt. I am not sure. I know very little about awe.

Only Rossi regained even partial control of himself, but it was in time to save us. With the visage of an angel of annunciation he told us to get into the skiff; tranced like those for whom miracles are worked, we obeyed. He undepressed the boatman and we rose. As we went up, we observed, as far as the eye could reach, a multitude of Venereans facing us and pursuing us with their love. Rossi had to depress Dr. Pound to keep him from joining them by jumping overboard.

We returned to our tunnel, which Rossi had previously marked with a slash of the solvator, and went into it. The power of those rejoicers diminished, but we did not feel safe and free from it till we had reached the outer

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end of the tunnel. They had put a new plug in; we solvated it and stepped into our bomb-cave, welcoming the hot noisiness of outer Venus.

It was the 380th hour; we had plenty of time. We felt like performing some sort of ceremony to mark our escape and the success, however slight, of our mission, but no celebration was possible under the circumstances. Rossi explored to the inmost extremity of the cave; he reported that he found almost no sand there, only a layer of dust. He guessed that the cave would never be filled, nor even completely closed off. None of the rest of us cared.

After we had entered and sealed the ship, we sat in the control room eating and philosophizing a little, reassuming, as it were, our roles as extensions of Earth.

"I would say," said Bertel, "that we've failed."

"Why?" I asked. "We've discovered—"

"Yes, yes," he replied, "we've discovered, and we've discovered. But who the devil would bother to make war on these nincompoops we've discovered? They'll never be up to it."

But Rossi was more helpful.

"There's always Mars," he said. "We can plunder the strength of Venus to wage war on Mars. Mars seems to be enemy enough for anybody."

"May they both last," said Bertel, "till man's nature has changed."

"That," said Dr. Pound, "is unthinkable."

Bertel looked at him contemptuously, but he saved his arguments till we should be out in space. It was time we took off.

As we were emerging in the ship from the mouth of the bomb cavern, Rossi remembered that we had neglected a part of our duty. The President had particularly admonished us to see to it when he had bid us Godspeed so many hours before. We agreed that the best place to put it was on the rear wall of the cavern. So we went back in, disembarked again, and fastened the bronze plaque high on the wall. It read:

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To all of us there must come a time when we think wistfully of having a benevolent, miracle-working genie-type on our side. To Carter Hoskins, however, there came a time when he urgently wished his well-intentioned apparition would just go away....

The R of A

by GORDON R. DICKSON

CARTER HOSKINS HAD JUST SCALDED his tongue on the morning's first cup of coffee, and was seated in his single armchair regarding the livingroom-kitchenette of his two room apartment through sleep-yellowed eyes, when the apparition appeared. The apparition wore something like a green clown suit wih purple polka dots and a skull cap. It was about five feet tall, with a bulbous nose and long white whiskers.

"Hail!" said the apparition.

"Huh?" said Carter, almost dropping his coffee cup.

"All hail," said the apparition, somewhat formally. "May I come in?" Its voice was a bit reedy.

"No," said Carter. "I mean yes. I mean no." His own voice had risen on a slight note of panic; but, since he was a natural baritone, this still left him a good octave or more below the tones of his visitor.

"Don't be silly," said the apparition, somewhat peevishly. It took a deep breath and started in again. "All hail, Carter Hoskins. You may call me R. The great R. I am about to be engaged in R of A work for your benefit."

"What?" said Carter.

"Don't try to understand," said R. "As the great R, I'm the only one who understands. The great R knows all, directs all. Observe." He pointed at the table-model television set in one corner of the room. It disappeared. "Now come back," said the great R. It winked back into existence.

"I can do anything," said the great R, rather smugly.

"What—what do you want?" gulped Carter.

"To reconstruct your life," said R. "That's the purpose of R of A work. You can trust me," he added, a little less formally, "because I know everything."

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"You do?" said Carter.

"Oh, yes," said R.

Carter nervously balanced his coffee cup on the occasional table alongside his armchair.

"Listen—" he said. For a fleeting moment he considered jumping his visitor and tying him up. Carter was something less than six feet, but high school and college hockey had given him a good set of muscles. Then he thought of the television set. "Listen," said Carter, "I think you've got the wrong man."

"No, I haven't," said R.

"I don't need any—uh—R of A work."

"Yes, you do. You *really* need R of A work. Now listen, I'll tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"How to run your life. Now—"

"Wait a minute!" yelped Carter. "Now hang on. I don't want you to tell me how to run my life. I don't want you. Besides, I'm late for the office. I got to go, now."

"That's right," said R. "You go to the office. I'll be right beside you—only invisible. Go ahead."

"If it wasn't for the fact that this representative from Tumblen Tool is due in to talk to us today, I would have stayed home," said Carter, as he approached the downtown bus. He paused, halfway up the steps. "I thought you were going to be invisible."

"I am," said R. "To everybody but you. They can't hear me, either."

"Something wrong?" said the bus driver, staring at Carter. Some other people sitting near the front of the bus were staring, too.

"Nothing—nothing—" muttered Carter. He got on the bus, headed back to the empty rear of the vehicle, and sat down.

"Look," muttered Carter, as they proceeded downtown, "I'm just imagining you. You're just an hallucination."

"I knew you'd say that," said R. "They always do. But it doesn't matter, since we're going ahead with our work anyway.... Oh, there she is."

The bus had just pulled up at a stop. Carter looked—and gulped. A small, bright-headed girl in a neat green business suit was getting on. Her name was Lucy. She was an illustrator who worked for an advertising firm in the same office building that held the office Carter worked in. She was beautiful, usually ordered tuna salad sandwiches for lunch in the office-building restaurant, and said, "Fifth floor" to the elevator operator in a smooth, slightly throaty voice that sent shivers up and down Carter's spine. He had never spoken a word to her in the six months since he had first seen her.

She came to the rear of the bus and sat down, resting a small brown purse and a large brown-paper portfolio on her knees.

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"Ask her for a match," said R.

"What?" yelped Carter. He yelped it out loud. The girl looked over at him. Carter cleared his throat and looked desperately out the bus window.

"Go on," said R, "ask her for a match."

"Certainly not!" hissed Carter under his breath.

"Ask her for a match!" shouted R.

"Quit that!" hissed Carter, cringing.

"Not until you ask her. You ought to see yourself. Everybody'll be looking at you. *Ask her—*"

"All right, all right—" whispered Carter. Hurriedly, before his nerve was lost entirely, he straightened up and leaned across the aisle toward the girl. "Uh—" he said.

She turned violet eyes upon him.

"Gotta match?" said Carter, desperately.

The violet eyes widened. She blinked.

"But you can't smoke on a bus," she said.

They stared at each other. Then suddenly, the ridiculousness of the whole situation piled up in Carter and he smiled. His smile broadened into a laugh. She began to laugh, too.

"I'm sorry," gasped Carter, when he could get his breath back. "I guess I'm just not very good at picking girls up."

"Oh, I wouldn't call it a pick-up," she said. "I've seen you around the building where I work lots of times."

"I know. I've been watching you. In the hall on the fifth floor there. And in the restaurant."

"I know. You like hot beef sandwiches," she said.

"You like tuna fish," he answered. "And your name's Lucy. At least that's what the girls you eat lunch with call you."

"Lucy Sandstrom. And you're Carter—"

"Hoskins."

"Hurray, hurray!" sang R, bouncing on the seat beside him. "We're on our way!"

Carter hardly heard him.

". . . and I'll meet you here at twelve-fifteen for lunch," said Carter, as they parted later at the door of his fifth-floor office.

"Twelve-fifteen."

"Good-by."

She drifted off down the hall. Carter turned and floated through the door into the business offices of Spencer Leighton Inc., where the office girls were already settling down to the reports sent in by their field salesmen.

Humming, Carter sat down at his own office manager's desk at the top of the room and reached for the first of a pile of incoming letters the girls had bucked on to him.

"Never mind that," said R, at

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his elbow. Carter blinked slightly and turned to look. R was standing beside him with a sheet of paper in one hand. "I've got a script of answers here you've got to memorize. Now, in just a few minutes—"

"Now listen," hissed Carter, under his breath, but not quite as harshly as he might have before the bus encounter with Lucy, "I'm grateful for what you've done for me, but now I've got to get to work. Thanks—and good-by."

"Oh, we've only just started," said R. "I want to help. You need happiness, wealth and fame. So far you've only got happiness. Now, you learn these answers I've got written down here—"

"Thanks. No," said Carter.

"But you have to learn them—"

"I don't. I won't. And furthermore—"

"Carter!" snapped a new voice. Carter jerked his head up guiltily to see Mr. Spencer—the front half of the Spencer-Leighton partnership—standing in the doorway of his private office. "Come in here when you get a moment, will you?"

"Yes sir. Right away," said Carter. Hal Spencer's office door closed again. Carter hastily started to stand up.

"Wait, don't go in yet," said R. "The answers—"

Carter ignored him. He strode over to the office door, rapped briefly on it, and walked on in.

"There you are, Carter," said Hal Spencer, raising his thin face from the correspondence in front of him. "Sit down."

Carter took a chair alongside the desk.

"Look, Carter," said Hal, "you know the name of this guy coming out from Tumblen Tool?"

"No, I don't," said Carter.

"Well, it's Jack Eason," said Hal. "I want you to remember that and pass it along to Susy. We don't want a receptionist who doesn't recognize the representative of one of our best customers when he arrives. Now, here's the set-up. He'll be in about three this afternoon. As soon as he shows up, you take him over from Susy and show him right in here."

R jogged Carter's elbow.

"Ask him if he wants you to hang around."

"Want me to hang around?" asked Carter without thinking. Hal Spencer looked surprised.

"Why, it might be a good idea, at that. I'll tell you what, if I invite you to sit down, too, you stick. If I don't say anything, fade back to your desk until I call for you. That way we can play it by ear. Got it?"

"Uh—yes," said Carter, perspiring, and making motions below the level of the desktop to shoo R away.

"And make me a reservation for two at the Sunset Room. I'll be

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taking him out to dinner later."

"Want me along on that?" prompted R, in Carter's ear.

"Want me—" Carter caught the words before they were all out of his mouth.

"What?" demanded Hal, staring slightly at him. "Go on. Speak up."

"Oh, nothing," said Carter, sweatily.

"Blast it, Carter," said Hal, "if you've got any ideas I want to hear them. I don't know why we can't sell that tool of theirs. Leighton doesn't know. The salesmen have no suggestions. We're on the spot. We move—or come up with some ideas for moving it—or they'll be hunting some other distributing organization. Now, what were you going to say?"

"Want me along on the dinner deal tonight?" said R.

"Want me along on the dinner deal tonight?" said Carter.

"What can you do?"

Carter hesitated, waiting for a prompt from R. But it was not forthcoming.

"Well, if nothing else," he stammered, "it'd help convince him the whole office was actively interested in the problem."

"An idea," said Hal. He looked at Carter closely. "I'll think about it. You can hop on that reservation business, now."

At lunchtime, he met Lucy at the elevator; and they went out of the building, and around the corner to eat lunch at a place where there weren't so many people who would know them. Among other things, while they were eating lunch, Carter told her about the representative due from Tumblen Tool.

"But *Jack Eason!*" said Lucy. "Didn't you say this Tumblen Tool outfit is in Philadelphia?"

"Yes," said Carter.

"Why, I know him!" said Lucy. "He's a little taller than you, and goodlooking—with black wavy hair?"

"I've never seen him," said Carter, a trifle stiffly.

"I used to go out with him, now and then, at the University."

"Oh?"

"I'll bet I can help you!" said Lucy, excitedly.

"Help me?"

"Why, yes. I know Jack—maybe I can help you think of some way of handling him. You say these Tumblen people aren't very pleased with the way you've been pushing this combination home tool of theirs?"

"Our salesman can't seem to move it with the industrial hardware stores," said Carter. "The trouble is, there's been so many of that sort of thing put on the market—you know, the screwdriver with extra smaller bits and awls kept in a hollow handle. Actually, the Tumblen outfit's got something really new and good in

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their assortment of extra bits and that spring windup handle with the rachet. But it looks like just another gimmick to the retailers."

"Can't you tell Jack that?"

"It wouldn't solve his problem if we did," said Carter. "Or Tumblen's. They want a plan for selling the tool, not reasons why we can't."

"Can't you think of something?" said Lucy. "Jack's very definite-minded. He likes things all laid out and accounted for—"

"You know," said Carter, with sudden thoughtfulness, "that's an idea."

"What's an idea? For Jack?"

"No," said Carter. "I mean for the retailers. You see, maybe if we could rig up a little metal jig that would hold a prepared block of varnished wood, our own screw, and the wound-up tool, our salesman could stand back and let it work—no hands. The tool would look like a piece of power machinery working."

He reached for the paper napkin and took a pencil from his pocket. "Let's see," he mumbled. "Something like this—and this—" He felt the pencil drawn from his fingers, firmly.

"Goodness," said Lucy. "Where did you learn to draw? Let me do it." She reached into her purse, fumbled around and came up with a five-by-nine file card. On the white back of this, she began to sketch.

"Like this?" she said.

"Well—uh—yes," said Carter. He felt a nudge at his elbow and looked around. R was standing there, poking him with gleeful enthusiasm, nodding at Lucy's bent head and grinning happily.

When Carter got back, Hal Spencer was still out to lunch; and, by the time he did return, Carter was caught up in the pressure of the full day's work. Carter saw the older man pass through his office on the way to the inner office, but he was in the middle of dictating a reply to one of their suppliers; and, by the time he had finished that, there was something else to demand his attention—and the afternoon slipped by. The sketch Lucy had made for him remained in his center desk drawer.

R had vanished again. For this much, Carter was thankful. There was a worm in the fact of the other's presence that gnawed away at everything R had brought him. Carter was still up to his ears in work and chained to his desk when he heard Susy's voice cutting across the room.

"Oh, yes, Mr. *Eason*. Just a minute."

Rising, Carter glanced at the wall clock across the room. Four-thirty. Where had the afternoon gone? He strode over to the visitor, looking him over on the way. Jack Eason was everything Lucy

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had said, and perhaps a bit more. The dynamic, good-looking type. Something inside Carter bared its fangs, slightly, even as he bared his teeth in a welcoming smile.

"Jack Eason!" said Carter, offering his hand. "I'm Carter Hoskins, the office manager here. Come along. Hal Spencer's been expecting you."

Eason responded politely. They shook hands. Carter escorted him through the busy office and into Spencer's private room.

"Mr. Spencer," he said. "Here's Jack Eason, from Tumblen."

Hal rose in welcome. He shook hands. He offered Eason a chair. He did not offer Carter one.

R appeared at Carter's elbow, panting slightly.

"I almost forgot," said R. "I got here just in time. Now."

"Now?" said Carter, involuntarily out loud.

". . . been looking forward to this. What was that, Carter?" asked Hal, looking over from his seat behind the desk.

"Could I talk to you outside for a moment?" prompted R.

"Could I," Carter swallowed, "talk to you outside for a moment?"

"Right now?" Hal frowned. "Well, all right. Just a minute, Carter out, closing the door behind him. "Now, what is this?" he demanded in a low voice.

"That drawing," said R.

"— just a minute —" Carter dived for his desk. He got out the sketch and brought it back to Hal. "Look, here's an idea. I didn't get a chance to show it to you earlier. But you see, we could use this as a sales aid—" He explained hurriedly.

"Why didn't you tell me this before?" said Hal. He stared at Carter. "All right, give it here." He disappeared back through the door of his private office.

Carter sighed and turned back to his own desk. R was sitting on the edge of it, beaming gleefully. Carter stared at him.

"You don't mean to say you're pleased with that reaction?" Carter said, sotto-voce.

"Wonderful, wonderful," bubbled R. "Everything's going just right."

Some twenty minutes later, Eason and Hal Spencer left the office, Hal nodding rather curtly to Carter as they passed. The office girls started their end-of-the-day bustle and cleanup; and Carter somewhat sadly wound up his own day's work.

He brightened, however, when he saw Lucy. She was waiting by the elevator for him; and they left the building together.

"It's all clear," said Carter. "*Will* you have dinner with me, tonight?"

And she said, "Yes, I'll just have to phone home first." Which started them off on a new round of personal discoveries — to wit,

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the fact that Carter had a room while Lucy lived in an apartment with her parents and one younger sister—that lasted up to the very door of the phone booth in the cocktail lounge across the street from the office building.

Carter was ordering two drinks while Lucy phoned, when R appeared on the bar stool next to him.

"Aren't you excited?" he said to Carter.

Carter frowned at him.

"Excited's hardly the word we use—" he began.

"Oh, that's right. I forgot, you don't know anything about it," bubbled R. "The turning point of your life comes up in just two hours and three minutes. Boy, I'll be right with you!"

"What?" said Carter. "What're you talking about—" he broke off as Lucy came back from the phone booth and sat down on the very bar stool R had been occupying. R winked out of existence just in time.

"What did you say?" Lucy asked.

"Nothing," said Carter. "Just thinking out loud, I guess. Now, here's your drink. Where would you like to have dinner?"

"The Sunset Room," said R, appearing on top of the cash register behind the bar.

"No!" cried Carter, involuntarily.

"No what?" asked Lucy, staring at him.

"J-just thinking out loud again," stammered Carter. "I thought of this place, the Sunset Room—"

So they talked about it for the next forty-five minutes over a couple more drinks and amongst a number of other subjects. At the end of that time they were both slightly intoxicated, and Carter, at least, was overwhelmingly in love. Also, they were hungry.

They went to the Sunset Room in a taxi.

When they arrived, they discovered they had forgotten all about reservations. They left Carter's name with the captain and went into the bar.

"Why, look," said Lucy.

Carter looked. He saw Eason and Hal Spencer sitting at one of the small, round tables. His eyes met Hal's, and Hal, beaming, waved them both over.

"Uh—well," said Carter, as they reached the table and both men there stood up. "Lucy, this is Hal Spencer, my boss. Hal, Lucy Sandstrom. You know Jack, I think."

"Well, well. Hello," said Hal. "You'll join us, won't you?"

They all sat down.

"You could have knocked me over with a swizzle stick," said Eason to Lucy, "when I saw you in the doorway there."

"Well, I knew you were in town. Carter mentioned you. How

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has everything been, Jack?" said Lucy.

"Well, shall we all have a drink?" asked Carter, somewhat loudly.

The waitress came and they ordered. Eason and Lucy developed a little conversation of their own, full of do-you-remembers and whatever-became-ofs. Carter hung on the outskirts of their talk until he felt his elbow nudged; he turned about to see Hal eloquently signaling with his eyebrows.

"Excuse me a minute," said Hal getting up, and signalling again.

"Uh—me too," said Carter. They went out together into the privacy of the foyer.

"What's wrong with you?" snapped Hal, when they were out of earshot of the bar. "All he's doing is talking to her. You look dangerous enough to be locked up."

"They're old friends," said Carter, grinding the words between his teeth. "And I just got to know her, today."

"Now listen to me—come on in here," said Hal. He led Carter off to one side of the foyer and down three carpeted steps to the small bar of the taproom. "One double scotch," he told the bartender. It came. "Drink that," he ordered.

"I don't want it," said Carter.

"You'll drink it and like it," said Hal.

Carter growled; but poured it down. Hal pounded him on the back as he strangled.

"Now," said Hal, when Carter had more or less recovered. "You listen to me. That sketch you gave me went over fine. How'd you like to fill a new job for us—as head of sales promotion?"

"What?" said Carter.

"I feel that this business of selling Eason'll do it—unless you'd rather trade all this future for a chance to punch him in the nose."

"He's right," said R, putting in an appearance right under the unaware Spencer's elbow.

"Hell!" said Carter disgustedly. "All right."

They went back and found that the time of Hal's dinner reservation had arrived. An arrangement was made with the captain to fit Carter and Lucy in at the reserved table. They all went in and sat down to dinner.

The food was good. The conversation became general again; and Lucy smiled at Carter. His spirits began to rise with the hors-d'oeuvres and continued up through the soup and salad to the steak. With the hot apple pie, however, he began to feel that perhaps he had overeaten—or perhaps that he had had a drink or two too many before they sat down at the table. He pumped himself full of coffee, but his transient enthusiasm, now started

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downhill, continued to slide with increasing rapidity. He felt, in fact, the slight beginnings of a hangover, and his own part in the conversation became more and more monosyllabic until he was merely sitting back, sipping his fourth coffee—which by now was beginning to taste bitter in his mouth—and listening.

The others seemed to sparkle all the more as he, himself, lost his lustre. Hal was jovial, the matter of the combination tool now settled. Lucy was beautiful, and Eason—Carter had to admit it even to himself—the life of the party. It was impossible not to laugh at his jokes, it was inevitable to warm to his outgoing personality. Sinking down into his own gloomy depths, Carter looked up at the star-like luminescences of his dinner companions and thought to himself that Eason and Lucy made a good-looking couple. And with that thought, he hit rock-bottom.

However, just at that moment, Hal got up and went off to talk to someone he had just recognized on the other side of the dining room; and Lucy excused herself to powder her nose. Carter, left alone, looked across his coffee cup at Eason with the fatalistic despair with which a downed Infidel might have watched a Crusader approaching to finish him off. Eason leaned across the table toward him.

"That Lucy!" he said.

"Yeah," said Carter.

"Tremendous, isn't she? She's always been that way, ever since grade school. I met her for the first time in third grade. Yes," said Eason, reminiscently, "it was love at first sight. Well, that's the way it goes. Time, I mean."

"Oh, yes. Time," said Carter.

"Never thought I'd see her again, after I was moved to Philadelphia. Then running into her like this!"

"'Scuse me," mumbled Carter, getting up. "Back in a minute."

He slogged off to the entrance and out of the dining room. A dull fury of self-accusation was curdling inside him. He looked around for R, but R was nowhere visible. He went over and looked in through the door of the men's washroom.

"R!"

There was no response.

"Listen, R!" he said, ominously. "If you can keep popping up at the right moment all the time, you can pop up now. Now, pop!"

R appeared, looking somewhat abashed, in the center of the tiled floor.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"What's the matter?" cried Carter, squinting a little to keep R in focus. "I'm a fake, that's what! Could I have any of this on my own? No! All right, I'll take promotion. But Lucy—that Eason's made for her!"

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"But listen—but wait—" said R.

"Listen! Never!" snarled Carter. "What d'you think I am, a puppet?" He repeated the last two words for emphasis. "Bad enough for *me*." He brooded darkly. "Not going to make Lucy a puppet. Who do you think I am? Dorian Gray? Or Faust?"

"What are you so mad about?" wailed R.

"Lucy," gritted Carter. "Not going to trick her into life of unhappiness."

"Oh, but that doesn't make any difference. You see—"

"Never!" announced Carter. with a wide gesture that threw him momentarily off balance. "If I can't win her on my own, I—I won't, that's all. Nice thing to look at her for the next eighty years and know I tricked her into marriage. So keep your advice! And to think—" his voice drooped sadly, "I might have done all this on my own. But I never had the chance. *You* had to come along with your advice! Well, I'm through. I'm leaving it all, job and everything!"

"But I thought you'd like it!" wailed R.

"I would, if I'd done it myself! This way's cheating. And I'm not going to stand for it! I'm going to take off and leave them all to sort it out by themselves. And I hope *you're* happy! At least I was plugging along in my own way, not bothering anybody before. Now, look! You had to stick your big nose in! You had to mess up my life and everybody else's!"

R burst into tears. He wailed like a banshee.

"Yeah, cry!" shouted Carter. "That's all you can do. Genius, eh? Superhuman, huh? You're nothing but a nasty-minded little —little—"

"What's the matter?" cried a woman's voice; and Carter almost swallowed his tongue as a rather Amazonian young woman appeared from nowhere in the middle of the floor. R turned and threw his arms around her short-skirted legs and howled.

"Mommy!" he wailed.

"What's going on, here!" cried the woman, turning flashing, violet eyes on Carter. "What're you doing to my boy?" She looked down on R and her expression changed. "Aha!" she snapped.

Reaching down, she took a firm hold on R's large nose and pulled. Nose and whiskers came off in her hand, revealing a small-boy face.

"So this is what you've been up to!" she said. "What have you been doing this time? Answer me!"

R only cried harder. She turned her head toward Carter.

"What did he do?"

"Uh—well—" babbled Carter, "he's been telling me what to do. And—" said Carter, his voice hardening as he remembered his

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troubles "—wrecking my life in the process. Telling me how to get successful, and pick up the girl I wanted to meet, and—"

"I was just pretending!" sobbed R. "I was just playing Rescue the Ancestor, that's all!"

"Rescue the—" Carter blinked.

"I was a Rescuer. But I didn't really do anything. I couldn't."

"Of course," said the woman, sharply. "The boy's right. The past is immutable. No matter what anybody from the future does, they can't change what's happened. You haven't been hurt a bit."

"Haven't been hurt!" cried Carter. "Yesterday I'd never spoke to the girl—I expected to go on being an office manager the rest of my life—and look at me now."

"Don't talk nonsense!" said the woman. "Let me scan." Her eyes veiled for a second. Then they cleared. "I just had a look," she said. "It's just as I told you. You haven't done anything but what you did do on this day, anyway. You haven't even said a word that you didn't originally say."

"You mean I asked for a match on the bus—" said Carter.

"Of course. Just as I told you."

She reached down and took R by the arm. "Now you come along," she said. "And if I ever catch you bothering your great, great grandfather again, I'll—"

They both disappeared. There was a certain finality about the way they did it this time.

Carter shrugged in a dazed way, turned and wandered out of the washroom. He went back to the table in the dining room, and sat down. Hal had rejoined the group and they were all looking at some snapshots.

"Oh, Carter!" said Lucy, passing one over to him. "Look at that! It's Jack's boat. He's got it down on the Chesapeake Bay; and he wants me to come down to Philadelphia some time and he'll take me sailing. Isn't it a perfect boat?"

"Ah—yes," said Carter, taking the snapshot in his hand. But he said it with a note of renewed confidence. He was thinking of the violet eyes of R's mommy. Give or take a few pounds and inches, he now remembered, that young woman had been the spitting image of Lucy.

"A very nice little boat, indeed," he agreed heartily.

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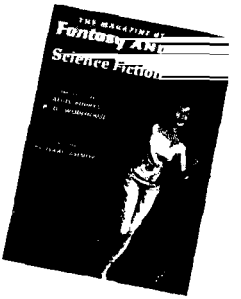

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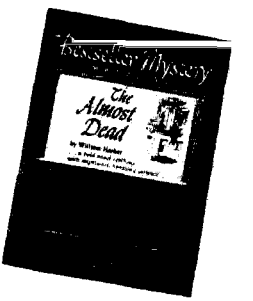

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